



## **One Family's Pre-Budget Submission 2008 to Department of Social and Family Affairs October 2007**

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### **Background**

One Family is working to ensure a positive and equal future for all members of all one-parent families in Ireland – changing attitudes, services, policies and lives. Together with one-parent families and those working with them, we are committed to achieving equality and respect for all families.

In addition to striving for fundamental structural change, we support individual one-parent families as they parent through times of family, work and life change, and those experiencing a crisis pregnancy. We know that every family is unique, and so we work in a family centred way to bring about better lives for parents and children.

One Family welcomes this opportunity to submit our pre-budget submission to the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

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### **Reality of life for one-parent families**

The latest Census of Population (Census of Population, CSO, 2006) confirmed the growth of non-traditional family forms in Ireland. The Census revealed that:

- The number of lone-parent families in Ireland increased from 153,900 in 2002 to 189,200 in 2006. This represents a 23% increase and means that one-parent families now represent 18% of all families living in the state.
- In 2002 there were just over 273,500 children living in a one-parent family. This increased to over 311,700 children in 2006. This represents a 14% increase and means that 21% or more than one in five children now live with a lone parent.
- The number of lone parent families with children under 20 years of age increased by 70.4% between 1997 and 2006. <sup>1</sup> In 2006, one-parent families with at least one child under 20 years old represented 22% of all families with children, an increase of 36% since Census 2002.



- Almost a third of one-parent households live in rural areas where services for one-parent families are particularly poor.
- Almost 14,000 children with disabilities live in one-parent families. This means that 8% of lone parents have a child with a disability compared to just 5% of couples (married and cohabitating) with children.

## **One Family's Submission**

This year One Family is framing its submission around the 3 main areas identified in the National Economic and Social Council report on the Developmental Welfare state (NESC Report No. 113. May 2005)

These 3 areas are:

- Income Adequacy
- Services
- Innovation

### **1. Ensuring Adequate Incomes for One-Parent Families**

It is estimated that over 40% of one-parent families depend either fully or in part for their income on the One-Parent Family Payment (Census of Population, 2006 and DSFA Annual report 2005). It is also known that one-parent families are more likely to live in poverty than other family types. The latest EU SILC results for 2005 show that 27 per cent of lone parent households live in consistent poverty, compared to 7.5 per cent of the population overall (EU SILC, 2006).

Given that, regardless of other measures, many one-parent families will continue to rely heavily on social welfare for at least part of the time when children are dependent on them, raising social welfare rates is a guaranteed way that the state can reduce poverty rates among such families.

We therefore call on the government to take the following actions:

- Increase the One-Parent Family Payment by €20 per week (This is in line with planned increases in pension payments to meet the government's commitments to increase the state pension to €300 by 2012. (An Agreed Programme for Government, June 2007));
- Increase the Qualified Child Allowance to €32, an increase of €10 a week, in a way that is employment neutral and that targets supports on low income families;(The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (Minimum Essential Budgets for six households, 2007) estimates that



food costs alone for children range from €6 to €16 per week depending on the age of the child).

- Pay the 'Back to School Clothing and Footwear' allowances three times a year in three equal instalments to reflect ongoing costs, amounting to €360 a year for primary school children and €650 a year for secondary school children. Rename the scheme 'Back to School' costs with the aim of supporting families on low incomes with all school-related costs. (The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice estimates direct education related costs of secondary school children at €1257 per annum and €330 per annum for a primary school child. The proposed rates, backed by the Combat Poverty Agency, would thus go along way to meeting education-related costs of families depending on social welfare).
- Increase the earnings disregards for the one-parent family payment to €250 with a €500 ceiling to bring such disregards in line with the historical percentage of Gross Average Industrial Earnings (GAIE) that these disregards represented.
- Increase the income limit for Family Income Supplement (FIS) to €540 and increase the percentage of income covered to 70% from its current level of 60%.
- Operate the same means test for Back to School Clothing and Footwear allowances for one-parent and two parent families, as is currently the case in relation to other social welfare payments, and increase the income limit for eligibility to the same level as that proposed for Family Income Supplement - €540 per week.
- Investigate the possibility of providing the proposed 'Back to Education' allowance automatically to families that are eligible for other income supports and whose income falls within the prescribed limits.
- Continue the policy of tapered withdrawal of rent supplement with a considerably greater proportion of income being subject to such withdrawal in the 2008 budget.
- Disregard maintenance and childcare costs in calculating eligibility to rent supplement to improve incentives to work.
- Undertake a widespread programme of information specifically targeted at lone parents about FIS and any other new payments and consider facilitating automatic payment of FIS to those who are eligible.



- Carry out comprehensive research on the most effective mechanisms for reducing child and family poverty, both in terms of income and services supports, aimed at streamlining access to such supports and at minimising poverty traps in this area

This package of measures will help to reduce poverty levels in one-parent families, will improve incentives to earn additional income and will increase take up of available supports. They will go along way to meeting the costs of living in a one-parent family in Ireland today. (The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice estimates such costs as € 325 for a one-parent family with two children, excluding childcare costs.)

## **2. Provision of Adequate Services**

If one-parent families are to move out of poverty and to experience full equality in Ireland today they must also have real access to the type and quality of services that will support them to access education, training and employment, and that will assist them to positively manage their work and caring responsibilities.

We therefore call on the government to provide the following services to one-parent families:

### **Education**

Education is a key priority for many lone parents, both for themselves and for their children. However lone parents face particular difficulties in remaining in education and in accessing second chance and further education due to a combination of cost and childcare barriers. To effectively address these barriers we propose that the government:

- Provide early childhood education and development for the children of one-parent families and of other low income families to assist in breaking the cycle of long-term poverty, starting with a guarantee of 1 years provision for such children as promised in the current Programme for Government, 2007.
- Provide supports such as the Teen Parent Support Programme on a nationwide basis to encourage young parents to stay in school, including a stay in school payment where required.
- Remove the requirement for lone parents to be on benefit for considerable periods of time before they can access supports to return to education and the requirement that they reach a certain age before they can return to education.



- Implement the commitment in the current Programme for Government to grant-aid part-time education courses leading to recognised qualifications in 2008. Such a provision would greatly assist lone parents to increase their educational qualifications. (The current Programme for Government promises to: ‘Introduce a new system of means-tested free fees for approved part-time courses. Together with incentives for colleges to offer more flexible and diverse course structures, this will enable more people with work or family commitments to avail of opportunities at third level.)

## **Housing**

Many one-parent families face particular difficulties in accessing housing. One-parent families are much more likely to live in rented accommodation than other family types and to make up a high proportion of those on waiting lists for local authority housing (CPA, ESRI).

We recommend therefore:

- A review of the points system for local authority housing be carried out to ensure that there is no discrimination against one-parent families. (According to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government one-parent families make up 38 per cent of households on the waiting list for social housing. (Assessment of Housing Needs, Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government 2005)
- Require local authorities to ensure that a proportion of local authority dwellings are available to meet the needs of one-parent families, including suitable provision for non-residential parents with child access.

## **Health**

One-parent families, along with other low income families, face serious inequalities in relation to accessing health services. Such families are particularly concerned to ensure that their children can access medical services, whether they are relying on social welfare or are in employment

We recommend therefore Budget 2008 include:

- Provision for a medical card for all children commencing with those that are on social welfare or eligible for FIS.



### **3. Innovations**

A number of innovative measures are required to assist one-parent families to move out of poverty and social exclusion. The government has demonstrated its commitment to addressing these issues both in the current Programme for Government and in Towards 2016. To progress these reforms we call on the government to take action in the following areas:

#### **Accessing Well Paid and Meaningful Employment**

Current government policy is to support lone parents to access and remain in employment. Such policies must reflect the current reality that over 60% of parents on the one-parent family payment are currently working but are trapped in low paid part-time employment due to a combination of poverty traps, lack of education and training, and lack of accessible childcare (DSFA). If such policies are to achieve their stated objective of moving one-parent families out of poverty they must address these barriers.

In line with our initial response to the government's proposals to fundamentally change the way the state supports lone parents on social welfare we recommend that in 2008 the Department of Social and Family Affairs:

- Works with other Departments to begin the introduction of a widespread programme of after school care as promised in the current Programme for Government.
- Considers introducing a 'Cost of Returning to Work' allowance to lone parents and other parents on low income moving from social welfare to work to reflect the significant costs involved in these transition periods.
- Pilot the introduction of a guarantee that lone parents moving from social welfare to paid employment can access suitable and accessible childcare and education and training and thus can move out of poverty and social welfare dependency and into meaningful employment;
- Explore the possibility of introducing an initiative to support lone parents on Community Employment (CE) to move onto skills based education and training and into meaningful employment, including research and evaluation of the issues that result in such low progression rates from CE at the present time;
- Progress the proposed reform of lone parent state supports in a way that supports choice, positive engagement, the introduction of incentives and the removal of barriers to progression within the labour market by lone parents, building on the findings of One Family's



research on the real barriers facing lone parents in accessing and progressing in the labour market.

## **Supporting Families involved in Family and Relationship Breakdown and Change**

Over 200,000 families in Ireland today are headed up by divorced, separated or remarried parents. Such families need information and support in dealing with related family law issues and in addressing the financial, child access and emotional and practical difficulties involved in such situations.

We therefore call on the government to:

- Plan to allocate funds to pilot a number of different models of Family Law and Child and Family Contact Centres, building on the findings of research on child contact centres currently being carried out by One Family, supported by the Family Support Agency.

## **Support Positive Parenting**

There is a growing recognition that the availability of realistic options around balancing paid work, caring/parenting and personal life is the key to a good quality of life for all families in an increasingly complex and work-orientated society. The Programme for Government 2007 commits the government to support groups providing parenting support.

One Family believes that the state can play a particularly important role in helping parents in one-parent and shared parenting situations to achieve a desirable balance between work, caring and recreation, and in supporting parents to parent well, and that such supports can result in very positive outcomes for children and parents in the families involved.

We therefore recommend:

- The extension of available work life balance options that do not result in a loss of income. In particular, the provision of a combination of paid maternal, paternal and parental leave to cover the period until a child reaches 1 year of age.
- The introduction of a 'parenting' fund to facilitate those parenting alone or in co-parenting situations to attend parenting courses and to network with others involved in parenting in this way.
- Provision of trained facilitators/mediators to work with new parents parenting alone and to support them to maintain links with the



labour market as well as to access family and parenting services during the early years of their children's lives.

### **Remove Inequalities faced by Migrant One-Parent Families**

Increasing numbers of one-parent families in Ireland today are from new communities. One Family's growing involvement with such families has highlighted to us how many of them are extremely isolated and face additional pressures in coping with family life and in surviving financially.

Families from new communities include asylum seekers, parents with humanitarian leave to remain, foreign workers on visas who become pregnant and spouses/partners of workers from new EU member states who are now parenting alone. Increasing numbers of such families are coming to One Family for support, advice counselling and training.

While the needs of such families are multifaceted and wide-ranging, we would focus on the following recommendations aimed at addressing some of their most urgent needs:

- the reinstatement of Child Benefit as a universal payment;
- provision of specialist accommodation for asylum seekers families living in direct provision;
- provision of culturally sensitive medical and pregnancy related services;
- availability of relevant information in key languages;
- removals of the requirement for those parenting alone with humanitarian leave to remain to demonstrate their contribution to Irish society in terms of paid employment at least when their children are very young, when they have large families etc.; and
- greater support for migrant women experiencing crisis pregnancies including real access to all options.

### **Recognition of the Rights of Non-Marital One-Parent Families**

The current constitutional position on the family, under which only the family based on marriage is officially recognised by Irish law, creates a situation in which non-marital families, including single parent families, have fewer rights than marital families. This is reflected in differences in for example adoption rights, guardianship, custody and access rights, succession rights, etc. A number of recent court cases have clearly illustrated the impact of such a





constitutional framework on family life in Ireland today. Such a situation is inequitable and is in breach of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and of the European Convention on Human Rights.

If non-marital families and especially their children are to receive equality of treatment before the law and within society generally we recommend the following:

- The government prepare to introduce a referendum to change the current constitutional definition of the family at the same time as the proposed constitutional amendment on children's rights to ensure that the best interests of the child are paramount in all cases and that there is fully equality between all children, regardless of the marital status of their parents.

**Ends**

**This submission is made on behalf of One Family – voice, support and action for one-parent families. Queries should be directed to Candy Murphy, Policy & Campaigns Manager Tel: 01 662 9212 Fax: 01 662 9096 Email: [policy@onefamily.ie](mailto:policy@onefamily.ie)**