
REPONSE

TO

**GOVERNMENT DISCUSSION PAPER:
PROPOSALS FOR SUPPORTING LONE
PARENTS**

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The national federation of services for
unmarried parents and their children



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INTRODUCTION

Treoir is the national federation of services for parents who are not married to each other and their children. Established in 1976, Treoir represents a wide range of agencies in Ireland and has as its main aim to promote the rights and welfare of parents who are not married to each other and their children.

Treoir welcomes the Government commitment to tackling child poverty and thus lone parent families who research has identified as one of the major groups at risk of poverty. Treoir also welcomes the objective of this Report of formulating a co-ordinated strategy in addressing the high risk of poverty and social exclusion faced by many lone parent families.

Overall the conclusion of both reports contained in this document is that while income support remains crucial and must be adequate to meet need, passive income support alone is not sufficient if poverty and social exclusion are to be comprehensively addressed, people are to have financial independence and reach their potential. Other supports are also required: advice, encouragement, referral, provision of support services such as education and training opportunities, childcare etc. Treoir fully supports this conclusion but disagrees with the implicit suggestion that one can only achieve one's full potential or make one's contribution to society, through engaging in employment. Being a full-time parent in the home is an aspiration of some parents and this is fully recognised in the Irish Constitution. Treoir feels strongly that parents of children of all ages should continue to have a choice of being a full-time parent and a choice of how they achieve their full potential and contribute to society.

Equality between families

Treoir has been working since its inception 30 years ago to remove the distinctions in the treatment of married and unmarried families. Treoir has also lobbied for the removal of the dis-incentives in the Social Welfare system for two parents who wish to live together and form a family unit. We therefore welcome the proposals in this Report to introduce a Parental Allowance for all families, regardless of their marital status or living arrangements. These proposals will have the effect of removing the cohabitation bar.

Teen Parents Support Programme

Treoir also welcomes the proposal in the Report to expand the Teen Parents Support Programme. Treoir has been closely involved with the TPSP since its inception in 1998 and research clearly shows that it is a very valuable support for young parents. However, Treoir strongly disagrees with the suggestion that engagement with the TPSP be compulsory. This would completely undermine the basis of the relationships between workers and young parents which is the cornerstone of the Programme.

HOWEVER, THERE ARE CAUSES FOR CONCERNS IN THE REPORT:

Compulsion

It is clear from the Report that the majority of OFP recipients are focused on work. The Report shows:

- nearly 60% of OFP recipients are already in employment (though mainly low paid)
- the average duration of payment is 7.5 years for unmarried parents
- Over 6,000 lone parents are on CE or JI schemes.
- nearly one third of OFP claimants who cease to qualify for OFP do so because they are over the income limit due to employment.

The question arises then as to why embark on a compulsory approach to moving lone parents into employment when the above statistics suggest that the majority of lone parents are already engaging with the labour market? Treoir believes that any reforms should be motivational in nature rather than compulsory. Treoir believes that lone parents want to provide for their children in the best possible way and willingly engage with any reforms which actually lift them out of poverty.

There is a danger that lone parents will be forced into low-paid employment and will be no better off than at present (see below on poverty).

Treoir strongly believes that all parents, low income or otherwise, and of children of any age, should continue to have a choice with regard to full-time parenting or engaging in employment

Poverty

Treoir welcomes any measure to improve the financial situation of lone parents. However despite a stated aim in the report to provide *income support at a level sufficient to enable full participation in society and remove poverty traps from the system of income support* the proposals in the document, if implemented, would not in any way address the poverty issue of lone parents.

- Table 4.2 of the Report on the *Comparison between existing OFP and proposed Parental Allowance for different household types* (Appendix i) and figures prepared by OPEN (Appendix ii) show that lone parents in employment will be worse off under the new proposals.
- It is unclear how those who are in receipt of Rent Supplement will fare due to the lack of information on secondary benefits in the Report. A review of the SWA scheme, under the Department's Programme of Expenditure Reviews is currently taking place with a view to completing a report by early 2006. For many parents the loss of Rent Supplement is the biggest obstacle to returning to education training or employment.
- Those who are currently unemployed and who move into employment will be worse off financially given employment related expenses such as child-care and transport.
- In addition the proposals to move lone parents on to Unemployment Assistance will follow fairly closely on the cessation of the Early

Childcare Supplement which will be a vulnerable time financially for most parents.

The government has an expressed commitment to addressing the poverty issues of lone parents and child poverty, but these proposals will not address these. However, work is continuing on examining how Family Income Supplement and Child Dependent Allowances of Social Welfare Payments could be merged to further support low income families. Without this additional support the proposals will not succeed in addressing poverty.

Treoir believes that any changes to the Social Welfare system must improve the financial position of lone parents per se and also must make it financially worthwhile for those lone parents who wish to engage in education, training or employment.

Labour Market

It requires a significant income to match the level of OFP and Rent Supplement at present. Therefore the provision of well-paid employment is essential to move off the Social Welfare system altogether. The lack of well-paid part-time jobs (which parents favour) and family friendly work practices make entering and remaining in the labour market extremely difficult for those with parenting responsibilities. In addition, for women, the fact that the average industrial wage for women is significantly lower than that for men makes juggling work with parenting responsibilities significantly less attractive.

Childcare

Childcare can be the biggest obstacle to taking up employment for many lone parents. The lack of affordable, flexible, quality childcare has long been detailed in many reports. Further the lack of alternatives to full-time childcare is a serious gap in service provision. The proposals outlined in this Discussion Paper hinge almost entirely on adequate childcare provision.

Integrated income support

The Group recommends the implementation of an integrated programme to support the movement by lone parents into more full-time and quality employment, thereby enhancing their incomes and reducing the risk of poverty to them and their children.

For the model to be fully effective a whole of government approach will be required with agreed objectives consistently reflected in policies across departments and resources made available to implement policy where necessary. The model proposed is also dependent on co-operation and co-ordination between a range of government departments and agencies.

Treoir welcomes the Group's recognition that the full commitment of all relevant Departments and agencies is crucial to the successful implementation of the recommendations.

Complexity

Treoir has for many years recommended that the Social Welfare system be simplified as it is exceedingly complex and this in itself is a disincentive to take up education/employment. One of the principles described in the Report was to provide a simplified system. However, the proposals, if implemented would not in any way simplify the system but in fact add further layers of complexity.

CONCLUSION

Treoir welcomes the broad thrust of the proposals contained in the Report, particularly the underlying principle of treating all families equally, and the removal of the disincentive to forming families currently inbuilt in the social welfare system. We also welcome the proposals in relation to education, training and childcare supports recommended in this report. However, there are serious issues which must be addressed if the current proposals are to be a success.

Minister Brennan has taken the lead in recommending radical changes in the Social Welfare system and this is very welcome. We await a similar commitment from other government departments such as the Departments of Education and Science and Enterprise Trade and Employment, and the Office of the Minister for Children, who will all need to be as committed as the Department of Social and Family Affairs if these proposals are to work.

In order for the new proposals to succeed the following supports are crucial:

- Setting the Parental Allowance and the income disregards in such a way as to lift parents on low income out of poverty
- Ensuring that any changes in the system do not 'claw back' secondary benefits – SWA Rent Supplement, medical card etc. and thus reduce the impact of the improvements
- Provision of sufficient available, affordable and flexible childcare
- Increased access to education and training opportunities
- Equality between wage levels of women and men
- Increased supply of well-paid part-time jobs for parents
- Improved family friendly work places/practices.