

PROPOSALS

TO THE

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY
AFFAIRS

ON

BUDGET 2005



**National Federation of Services for
Unmarried Parents and their Children**

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Treoir is the national coordinating body of both Statutory and Voluntary Agencies working with parents who are not married to each other and their children. Originally known as the Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children it was founded in 1976 and has as its aim to promote the rights and welfare of unmarried parents and their children in Ireland. Membership of Treoir is open to professional agencies providing services to parents who are not married to each other. Treoir has as members a combination of statutory and non-statutory bodies, including specialist agencies, HSE, maternity hospitals, adoption societies, self-help groups.

The four Core Principles of *Treoir* are:

- *Treoir recognises the diversity of family life in Ireland*
- *Treoir recognises that all families, including unmarried families, have the same rights to respect, care, support, protection and recognition*
- *Treoir supports and promotes the rights of all children as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*
- *Treoir believes that all children have a right to know, be loved and cared for by both parents*

Current Activities of Treoir:

- * A national, confidential, comprehensive and free information service for unmarried parents and those involved with them
- * A wide range of publications including the *Information Pack for Unmarried Parents*, *Being there for them* (a booklet for grandparents), *Work it Out*, *Information for Young Parents in Education* and a series of *Information leaflets*
- * Organising conferences, workshops and other training sessions for unmarried parents and those who work with them
- * Networking with other groups
- * Policy development
- * Promoting research
- * Providing support for workers with young parents through the National Resource Centre for those Working with Young Parents
- * Coordinating the Teen Parent Support Initiative

Introduction

This pre-budget submission to the Department of Social and Family Affairs draws attention to the responsibilities of the Department with regard to unmarried parents. However it is self-evident that the responsibilities for offering support to unmarried parents and their children extends across several departments including Health and Children, Education and Science, Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Environment and Local Government, and Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

In our experience, many of the difficulties faced by unmarried parents are created by inadequacies in the coherence in delivery of services and programmes of these different departments as they impact on the individual lives of unmarried parents and their children.

In addition, difficulties are created by level of financial support offered to unmarried parents and their children

We believe that Government Departments should make greater efforts to work together to ensure that there is both a national coherence in policy preparation as well as coherence in the implementation and delivery of programmes and services.

Payments for Lone Parents

The disproportionate numbers of lone parents living in poverty is well documented.

- *Treoir* proposes the streamlining and simplifying the social welfare system. The interaction between welfare and work is very complex and may be a disincentive to take up employment/education. Means tests and conditions differ between schemes and payments e.g. One-parent Family Payment, Rent Supplement, Medical Card, Back to Work Allowance, Back to Education Allowance, Community Employment etc.
- *Treoir* recommends an increase in the One Parent Family Payment from €148.80 - €167.30 per week plus €19.20 for the child dependent.
- *Treoir* proposes significantly increasing the level of income disregarded before a parent loses the One Parent Family Payment. It has not been increased since the late 90's when it was introduced and its value has diminished considerably. We recommend that the first €190 per week should be completely disregarded and half of earnings between that and the earnings "ceiling" be disregarded. The ceiling of €293 is totally inadequate. This is in line with the policy of making the option of work more attractive.
- *Treoir* recommends increasing the household income limit (€317) for entitlement to secondary benefits. It is particularly important that lone parents in receipt of the one parent family payment and on a Community Employment Scheme should not lose out on secondary benefits. It is contrary to the policy of encouraging and facilitating lone parents to work.
- *Treoir* recommends continuing the policy of increasing Child Benefit so that it will adequately reflect the actual cost of rearing a child in Ireland.
We recommend €155.90 per week for 1st and second child and €192.85 for subsequent children.

- *Treoir* recommends that women who qualify for maternity leave and do not qualify for maternity benefit should receive supplementary welfare allowance.

It is also recommended that women on Maternity Benefit should be enabled to avail of rent/mortgage interest supplement during the maternity leave period if the need arises.

- *Treoir* recommends that it should be possible for a lone parent in receipt of maintenance payments for the child to benefit from the maintenance irrespective of whether it is paid to the mother or directly to the Department. (Currently there is no benefit to the family if the maintenance is paid directly to the Department of Social and Family Affairs).
- Half of the maintenance for children should be allowable for Supplementary Welfare Allowance and Rent and Mortgage Interest Supplement purposes.

Education

The links between early school leaving, poor educational attainment, long-term dependency on welfare, poverty and social exclusion are undisputed.

The main barriers to lone parents remaining in or returning to education are:

- childcare costs
- the loss, in certain circumstances, of secondary benefits such as Rent Supplement on which the lone parent depends for housing
- inconsistent treatment of lone parents as a family unit
- complex schemes with overly rigid qualifying conditions.

To address these obstacles *Treoir* recommends that:

- All young mothers in second level education receive financial support with childcare
It is imperative that childcare support be provided immediately for young mothers under the compulsory school leaving age.
- A childcare allowance (such as the Care to Learn or the Childcare Grant Schemes in the UK and Northern Ireland) should be introduced for those attending all other training and educational courses up to degree level
- That parents in receipt of One Parent Family Payment be assessed as a family in their own right and on their own means for the purpose of the Higher Education Grant regardless of their age or place of residence
- That the qualifying criteria and income support arrangements for existing schemes (VTOS, Youthreach, BTEA) be streamlined and harmonised so that
 - income support, including Rent Supplement, is unaffected by participation in education /training

- lone parents are supported to return to education/training when they are ready and are not excluded from the course of their choice by virtue of their age or length of time out of education
- the choice of course is determined by whether it best meets the needs of the lone parent rather than by the income support package attached to it.

Cohabiting couples

The social welfare system should not be a barrier to formation of two parent families

- *Treoir* believes that there needs to be innovative thinking and dialogue on ways of removing the disincentives in the social welfare system to form two parent family units and for fathers to take an active part in their children's lives.

Some possibilities are

- the introduction of a "Basic Payment"
- individualisation of the social welfare and tax systems
- reducing on a tapered basis the one-parent family payment on commencement of cohabitation rather than cutting it altogether

Treoir recommends that the practice of the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Finance treat cohabiting couples differently is no longer acceptable, particularly as in both cases it is to the benefit of the State. (for income tax purposes they are treated as two separate individuals and for social welfare purposes they are treated as married parents)

Childcare

Insufficient childcare and exorbitant costs have created barriers for unmarried parents accessing education and employment.

- *Treoir* recommends that adequate, affordable, accessible, flexible childcare be made available to all parents but especially lone parents.
- A funding programme for childcare needs to be developed to support young parents to stay in education or to avail of further education and training. There should be no disincentives to remaining in school.

Health

- *Treoir* recommends that the medical card scheme be extended to all childcare

