

**Submission to the  
Office for Social Inclusion**

**on**

**The National Action Plan against  
Poverty and Social Exclusion  
2006-2008**

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

**October 2005**

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## **Priorities 2006-2008**

- **Social Welfare payments should be adequate to lift lone parents out of poverty and reflect the real cost of providing adequately for a family**
- **There needs to be a fundamental streamlining and harmonising of the various ‘welfare to work’ schemes with clear, detailed unambiguous information available to lone parents on their financial implications**
- **Develop an overall policy and action plan, in consultation with the social partners, which will give adequate, affordable, accessible and flexible childcare to all parents regardless of what they wish to use childcare for.**
- **The full Medical Card should be available to all children**
- **Preventive services such as the Teen Parents Support Programme, the Community Mothers Scheme, Homestart, Home Maker, Home Help etc. should be available to all first time and vulnerable parents as a means of supporting their social inclusion**
- **A childcare allowance (such as the Care to Learn Scheme, Childcare Grant Scheme or New Deal Lone Parents Scheme in the UK and Northern Ireland) should apply to all training and educational courses up to degree level**
- **A coherent and aggressive housing public policy should be developed which would provide appropriate and sufficient housing for all who need it including parents who are living apart**
- **In order to engage with those lone parents who are most socially excluded it is important that Family Resource Centres and self-help groups are adequately resourced. In particular, additional funding should be available to employ outreach workers**
- **The social inclusion agenda should include teen parents as a separate target group**
- **It is imperative that childcare support be provided immediately for young mothers under the compulsory school leaving age.**

## **Treoir**

Founded in 1976, Treoir is the National Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children.

Its main aim is to promote the rights and welfare of unmarried families in Ireland. Membership of Treoir is open to professional agencies providing services to unmarried parents. They are a combination of statutory and non-statutory bodies, including specialist agencies, health boards, maternity hospitals, adoption societies and self-help groups.

The following are the core principles under which Treoir operates:

*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.*

## **Introduction**

The main aim of Treoir is to promote the rights and welfare of parents who are not married to each other and their children. These parents may or may not be living together.

The narrow definition of the family under Article 41 of the Irish Constitution excludes non marital families.

The Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Revenue Commissioners treat cohabiting couples in different ways.

Currently over 30% of all births are outside marriage. While not all of these births result in the formation of new one parent families we know that, overall, the number of lone parent families with children has increased very significantly.

Poverty statistics show that lone parent families are particularly vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. The EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2003, for example, showed that lone parents households have the highest deprivation levels of all households for each of the eight deprivation indicators used.

Treoir works indirectly to support lone parents experiencing poverty and social inclusion through:

- 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 parents who are not married to each other, Work it Out (for lone parents wishing to avail of education, training or employment), Young Parents in Education (for young parents who wish to avail of education or training) as well as a series of Information leaflets etc.
- Organising conferences, workshops and other training sessions for unmarried parents and those who work with them
- Networking with other groups/organization
- Policy development
- Promoting relevant research
- Providing support for workers with young parents through the National Resource Centre for those Working with Young Parents
- Co-coordinating the National Teen Parents Support Programme.

In 2004 there were almost 5,000 calls from lone or unmarried parents to Treoir's National Information Centre. To date in 2005 the National Information Centre has received over 3,500 queries.

The issues raised by Treoir in this submission reflect the issues and challenges raised by those parents.

**Objective 1**  
**Facilitating participation in employment**

**Weaknesses of current provision**

For unmarried parents in receipt of Social Welfare there are serious difficulties with existing ‘welfare to work schemes’ which can act more as a barrier to taking up employment rather than an incentive. For example, neither the weekly household income limit for retaining secondary benefits nor the income disregard for One-Parent Family Payment (OFP) have increased since the 1990s.

The shortage of good quality affordable childcare is a major barrier to employment for lone parents many of whom are in the lower-paid end of the employment market.

Employees on maternity leave who do not meet the requirements for Maternity Benefit are not automatically entitled to Supplementary Allowance because they are technically in employment. This is a disincentive to returning to work.

There is little recognition that reconciling work and family life is particularly difficult for those who wish to be in employment but are parenting alone.

**Suggested Policy Measures**

- There needs to be a fundamental streamlining and harmonising of the various ‘welfare to work’ schemes with clear, detailed unambiguous information available to lone parents on their financial implications
- The means test for OFP with regard to earnings from employment should be reviewed and increased. Currently the first €146.50 of weekly earnings is completely disregarded and half of the remainder of earnings up to €293.00 per week is assessed as means. Treoir recommends that the first €190.00 of weekly earnings should be disregarded and that half of earnings between that and the earnings “ceiling” should be disregarded. The current ceiling of 293.00 is totally inadequate and needs to be increased substantially
- The transition from welfare to work needs to be managed in such a way as to make work clearly worthwhile. The weekly household income limit for retaining secondary benefits on taking up employment should be increased from €317.00 which is totally inadequate and needs to be revised upwards.
- Information on Family Income Supplement should be publicised regularly to increase take-up of this supplement by low paid workers who are unaware of their entitlement to it

- Develop an overall policy and action plan, in consultation with the social partners, which will give adequate, affordable, accessible and flexible childcare to all parents but especially to lone parents who wish to avail of employment
- The state should provide legislative framework for more family friendly work places
- Parental leave should be paid and the duration extended
- Paid maternity leave should be extended
- There should be paid paternity leave
- A greater degree of flexibility is required in the Supplementary Welfare Allowance System to allow women who are ineligible for Maternity Benefit receive Supplementary Welfare Allowance and Rent and Mortgage Interest Supplement though they are technically in employment.

**Objective 2 (a)**  
**Access to Resources**

**Social Welfare System**

**Weaknesses of current provision**

The main weaknesses with the Social Welfare system are:

- that payments are inadequate
- as stated under Objective 1, 'welfare to work' schemes are failing to make work worthwhile and
- criteria for OFP may act as a disincentive to form two parent families.

The current levels of Social Welfare provision for families on OFP, the main Social Welfare payment for lone parents, condemns them to a life of consistent poverty with all its accompanying disadvantages. As stated in the Introduction, a disproportionate number of one-parent families live in poverty.

Eligibility for OPFP requires that parents not live together. This is a great disincentive to form two parent families which in most cases is in the best interest of the child.

It is not acceptable that government departments treat cohabiting couples inequitably. Cohabitees are treated by the Department of Social and Family Affairs in the same way as married people (i.e. as dependents) and by the Revenue Commissioners as separate unrelated individuals.

In both cases they are treated in the way that is most beneficial to the State.

**Suggested Policy Measures**

- Social Welfare payments should be adequate to lift lone parents out of poverty and reflect the real cost of providing adequately for a family
- The Social Welfare system should be individualised. This would address the financial disincentives to form two-parent households.
- While working towards the individualization of the Social Welfare system, the Revenue Commissioners need to recognise the dependents of cohabitees.



**Objective 2 (b)**  
**Facilitating access to Rights**

**The Rights of Children**

**Weaknesses of current provision**

Children's rights are absent explicitly from the Irish Constitution and this needs to be rectified.

Currently only the marital family has the protection of the Constitution.

Marriage, however, is no longer the primary or dominant gateway to family formation or re-formation and the family can take a variety of forms. For the rights of all children to be fully protected, there can be no discrimination between children based on the family form into which they are born.

**Suggested Policy Measures**

- The enumeration of children's rights within the Irish Constitution using both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights as a framework.
- Children's rights should be paramount notwithstanding any other article in the Constitution
- It is imperative, particularly in regard to protecting children's rights that the definition of the family based on marriage is removed.

## **Rights of families not based on marriage**

### **Weakness of current provision**

As stated above, families headed by cohabiting parents are not afforded the protection of the Constitution in the same way as are married parents.

As stated under 'Social Welfare Payments' the taxation and welfare systems currently treat cohabiting couples inconsistently and in a manner which is financially detrimental to the couple but of maximum benefit to the Exchequer. This situation can inhibit the formation of two-parent families, thereby adversely affecting the best interest of children and, in cases of death or separation, can lead to poverty through, for example, the payment of inheritance tax or lack of access to pension schemes.

### **Suggested Policy Measures**

In addition to the policy measures proposed under 'Social Welfare Payments' Treoir also suggests that

- The protection of family life in all of its forms should be included in the Constitution based on Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights which reads: *'Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence'*
- Parental rights, if enumerated in the Irish Constitution, should apply equally to all parents: mothers, fathers, married or unmarried and, as stated earlier, be subject to the principle that children's rights are paramount
- Article 41.2 should be retained in a revised gender-neutral form to recognise the contribution of either partner within the home. The revised article would read:
  - *'The State recognises that home and family life give society a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall endeavour to support persons caring for others within the home'*
- Cohabiting parents should be legally recognised. Recognition can be achieved either through a presumptive scheme or a registration scheme
- All pension schemes need to ensure that dependent cohabitees are included in the class of potential beneficiaries.

**Objective 2 (d)**  
**Facilitating access to services**

**Access to Health**

**Weakness of current provision**

The links between poverty and ill-health are well established, as are the links between lone parenthood and poverty.

For reasons of childcare or transport costs low-income lone parent families find it more difficult to access universal health services. This is particularly the case for rural lone parents.

There is inadequate emphasis on preventative services.

**Suggested Policy Measures**

- The full Medical Card should be made available to all children
- Preventive services such as the Teen Parents Support Programme, the Community Mothers Scheme, Homestart, Home Maker, Home Help etc. should be available to all first time and vulnerable parents, especially in rural areas
- Comprehensive family planning services should be widely available and offer a wide range of services to ensure choice for women
- The HSE should fund an adequate and flexible system of transport (such as a mini-bus) in rural areas for those needing to access hospitals or health centres
- Health Centres can play a crucial role in the well being of the community. Health Centres need to be adequately resourced to provide a full range of services including preventative services.

## **Access to Education and Training**

### **Weakness in current provision**

There is insufficient emphasis on supporting young lone parents to remain in education/training in the first instance.

There is practically no support to enable young parents progress automatically from second level to third level.

Where education/training is offered there is either no support or inadequate support with childcare.

Schemes which encourage lone parents to return to education/training are too complex and have overly rigid qualifying conditions.

There is inconsistent treatment of young lone parents as a family unit.

### **Suggested Policy Measures**

- Initiatives in relation to education and training should place as much emphasis on retaining lone parents in education/training as it does on supporting those who have ‘dropped out’
  
- A childcare allowance (such as the Care to Learn Scheme, Childcare Grant Scheme or New Deal Lone Parents Scheme in the UK and Northern Ireland) should apply to all training and educational courses up to degree level
  
- 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 and
  - lone parents are supported to return to education/training when they are ready and are not excluded from the scheme/course of their choice because they are not old enough or because they have not ‘dropped out’ of education for a sufficient length of time
  
- Young parents in receipt of OFP should 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.

## **Access to Housing**

### **Weakness of current provision**

Privately owned accommodation at market prices is beyond the reach of most lone parents given that they are, for the most part, rearing their families on one income or on social welfare payments.

This is compounded by inadequate building programmes by local authorities which results in acute housing shortages in the public sector

### **Recommendations:**

- A coherent and aggressive housing public policy should be developed which would provide appropriate and sufficient housing for all who need it
- Local Authorities should double the number of social housing units that it provides as recommended by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) in its report *'Housing In Ireland: Performance and Policy'* published in December 2004
- Local Authorities should provide a range of housing types, including small accommodation units for small families
- Children have a right to have a relationship with both parents. To promote shared parenting it is important that the housing needs of both parents who have access to their children be recognised and addressed
- A better social mix in the allocation of local authority tenancies is essential to avoid the ghettoising of lone parent families
- The local authorities who are running The Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) for people in receipt of Rent Supplement for more than 18 months must carry out their statutory obligation to inspect properties in the private rented sector and only approve those where the standard of accommodation is satisfactory
- Bed and Breakfast accommodation is not appropriate accommodation for families. More "half-way" housing schemes need to be provided for families seeking emergency accommodation.

**Access to mediation/ legal services**

**Weakness in current provision**

The legal situation regarding parents who are not married to each other is different to that of marital parents.

Where relationships are acrimonious recourse to the legal system is almost inevitable.

Even where relationships are harmonious parents may still wish to use the court system to access their rights in relation to their children.

While the waiting period for legal aid has been considerably reduced, where the rights of children are at stake, speedy access to the courts is essential.

Because of the low income threshold for free legal aid many parents on low incomes or social welfare cannot access this service

The requirements of the Children's Act 1997 to encourage mediation services are not being adequately followed through.

**Suggested policy measures**

- An accessible, adequate and speedy family court system should be put in place
- The means test for accessing legal aid needs to be revised
- Sufficient legal aid services should be available to those who need it
- There needs to be a major promotion of family mediation services
- Where courts recommend supervised access provision must be made for this.

## **Access to Child Care**

### **Weakness in current provision**

In this regard Treoir has already referred to the needs of lone parents under ‘Objective 1: Facilitating Participation in Employment’.

The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) is driven primarily by labour market considerations despite the fact that many parents and children need childcare for reasons other than employment. The demands of parenting are enormous. For reasons of youth or personal circumstances, lone parents, in particular, often lack the necessary personal resources and external supports to raise their children alone. This is evidenced by the disproportionate number of children of lone parents who are in state care. Such parents need respite from and support with parenting

Equally, children reared in situations of poverty need access to interventions such as good quality childcare to compensate for disadvantages in other areas of their lives.

### **Suggested policy measures**

In addition to recommendations made under Objective I, Treoir also suggests that

- In formulating Childcare Policies the government should include provision for families under stress who cannot afford childcare at commercial rates
- The EOCP should be expanded into initiatives where eligibility for funding and for childcare places is not linked to the market.

**Objective 3**  
**Preventing the risks of exclusion**

**Social isolation of lone parents**

**Weakness in current provision**

Social isolation is a particular problem for lone parents. This isolation, coupled with the high risk of poverty which lone parents face, can be one of the greatest obstacles to positive parenting and a healthy and enjoyable involvement in society.

Family Resource Centres and self-help groups do not always receive the recognition they deserve. They are among the best resources for lone parents in terms of emotional support, practical support and a source of information.

**Suggested policy measures**

In addition to preventative measures recommended under 'Access to Health Services'

Treoir suggests that:

- There is a need to continue to develop and adequately resource more Family Resource Centres
  
- There is a need to continue to resource self help groups for lone parents
  
- Intensive outreach work is often necessary to ensure engagement with these services. Resource centres and self help groups need to be financed to employ outreach workers to do this.



**Objective 4**  
**Helping the most vulnerable groups**

**Teen Parents**

**Weakness in current provision**

This is an important sub group of lone parents who, by virtue of their age and vulnerability require additional supports.

**Suggested policy measures**

All of the policy measures suggested elsewhere in this submission apply to teen parents. In addition Treoir suggests that:

- The social inclusion agenda should name teen parents as a separate target group
- A national funding scheme be established which would fund childcare for all young mothers in second level education. *It is imperative that childcare support be provided immediately for young mothers under the compulsory school leaving age*
- The TPSP should be expanded so that every teen parent has access to a Programme
- Where young mothers choose to remain in education following the birth of their baby schools should develop an individual Education Support Programme with them.