



The National Federation of Services for
Unmarried Parents and their Children

Pre-Budget Submission 2022

Pandemic Recovery Plan Supporting Families

July 2021

28 North Great Georges Street,
Dublin 1

01 – 6700 120 www.treoir.ie

About Treoir

Treoir is the national federation of agencies who provide services to unmarried parents and their children. Founded in 1976, membership is open to professional agencies, NGO's, community organisations and others. These are a combination of statutory and non-statutory bodies, including specialist agencies, the HSE, maternity hospitals, and self-help groups.

In partnership with its member agencies Treoir promotes the rights of unmarried parents and their children by providing specialist information and advocating on their behalf.

Treoir:

- provides a National Information Service to unmarried parents and those working with them.
- co-ordinates the National Teen Parents Support Programme.
- hosts the employment of the Kinship Care Ireland National Coordinator
- promotes change to achieve constitutional and legal equality for unmarried parents.
- advocates for access to decent public services for parents and their children.
- Conducts research on the legal and socioeconomic position of unmarried parents.
- Collaborates with other agencies to promote equality and fairness for unmarried parents and their children.
- Makes submissions to government bodies, Oireachtas Committees, and other fora.

Treoir principles:

- recognise the diversity of family life in Ireland.
- recognise all families, including unmarried families, have a right to respect, care, support, protection, and recognition from the state.
- promote the rights of children as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- recognise all children have a right to know, be loved and cared for by both parents, where possible.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have brought to the fore new and existing challenges for unmarried parents and their children. Uncertainty around economic wellbeing has been exacerbated due to forced unemployment and increased dependence on state transfers in terms of social welfare. Household security, which may already have been precarious, was further threatened by the closure of schools, creches, and other vital public services. As we exit into a post-pandemic environment a new set of challenges await. These include the need to protect families in receipt of state benefits, especially those headed by a lone parent to prevent them falling further into poverty; and to deal with the impact of Covid driven unemployment. The third key issue is the provision of public services particularly housing, especially for unmarried parents and their children. The pandemic highlighted the importance of social transfers for lone parents and the potential of the state to proactively address poverty through innovative and far-reaching measures.

According to Census 2016 the number of cohabiting couples with children in Ireland increased by 25.4 per cent to 75,587 and the number of one-parent families with children by 1.5 per cent to 218,817. Budget 2022 must protect vulnerable groups by way of measures that directly address uncertainty around living standards, food security, housing, childcare, and work. The aim being to explicitly work to mitigate the uneven impact of the Covid19 crisis on lone parents, and to ensure as a matter of government priority that vulnerable groups in society especially women and children have enough to live on.

DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT AFFAIRS AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Prior to the current public health crisis, one in every seven people in Ireland lived with an income below the poverty line; about 680,000 people. Lone parent families 85% of whom are headed by a female are particularly at risk of living either on or below the poverty line. Back in 2020 the ESRI predicted that these numbers would rise due to the uneven impact of the Covid-19 crisis on women and children.

The Department of Finance Stability Programme Update projections for unemployment point to an optimistic scenario where unemployment remains high for the next 12-24 months. The most recent government forecast is that it will be between 8% and 10%, while independent experts put the figure at between 12% - 14%. When recovery comes, it is likely that many low-income workers, and employees with precarious employment conditions many of whom are women, will be the last to experience it. Without a concerted government effort, many families will be stuck in poverty for some time. The crisis has highlighted the presence and challenges of the poorest in our society in so many ways. It demonstrated the challenges of life on a low income; even when that income is set at rates well above core social welfare payments and the poverty line.

If poverty rates are to fall during the lifetime of the 33rd Dáil, we need to see:

- an increase in core social welfare payments,
- equity of social welfare rates,
- investment in housing, childcare, and key public services
- adequate payments for children,
- refundable tax credits,
- decent rates of pay for working lone parents.

Recent studies from the ESRI, the Nevin Institute, and St Vincent de Paul highlight a persistent problem with poverty which will be exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. As a society we must confront these new challenges and adequately resource new strategies to successfully target and reduce poverty. If we are to deal with the socio-economic impact of Covid19 on lone parent families we must invest in key public services and make policy decisions deliberately designed to reduce poverty, in all its dimensions.

Policy Solutions

Lone parents and unmarried couples with one or more children in low paid employment, engaged in part-time work or unemployed, experience very high levels of consistent poverty. Moreover, a significant number of those dependent on the PUP will face new levels of precarity with the phasing out of the payment in September. The multifaceted nature of poverty and the impact of Covid19 make it imperative that going forward allowances, payments, and benefits related to children and families are generous and under constant review. Without the social welfare system 41.4 per cent of the Irish population would have been living in poverty in 2019. In 2019 social welfare payments reduced the poverty rate by over 28 percentage points to 12.8 per cent. Since then, however, we've had two Budgets where core social welfare rates were not increased.

In the present environment, cuts to income will hamper long-term economic growth, while any reduction in the tax take will stifle our ability to provide essential public services such as housing, childcare, and decent public health. Thus, cutting back on the Covid Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) too soon will worsen the economic impact of the virus. In effect, PUP is an investment in protecting the spending power of Irish households and supporting employment and economic growth. Going forward the aim must be to fight child poverty and sustain living standards for lone parent households.

Cuts to PUP for those who worked part-time hours before the crisis from €350 to €203 a week, or 43 per cent will have a significant impact on lone parents. The tacit recognition of the inadequacy of €203 a week to live on with the introduction of the €350 PUP in March 2020 is now being rolled back. Going forward the introduction of a living wage is a more suitable policy approach, especially considering that

the initial level at which the PUP was set, was an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of both unemployment supports and wages for hundreds of thousands of Irish employees. Moreover, there would be less need for supplementary welfare payments such as the Family Income Supplement if a living wage were introduced. The government has made a number of long-term spending pledges, including over €3 billion in its pandemic recovery plan. This recovery plan must prioritize poverty reduction, housing for all, investment in public services, and the reduction of unemployment.

Recommendations

- The Government to commit to benchmarking core social welfare rates at 27.5 per cent of average earnings (which is €222.08 per week) in Budget 2022.

Treoir is calling on the Government to increase all core social welfare payments by €19 per week over the next two years, starting with an increase of €10 per week in Budget 2022.

- This increase should happen on 1 January 2021.
- The government should provide additional resources to lone parents adversely affected by the pandemic who are already in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment.
- A Covid-19 Emergency Payment could be used to alleviate poverty rates experienced by one parent families where the parent has been unable to return to work, is in receipt of rent supplement, in emergency accommodation or a refuge.
- The Emergency Payment to remain in effect until the Crisis ends or circumstances change.
- Treoir is calling on the government to adopt targets aimed at reducing child poverty in lone parent households.
- Carry out impact assessments on policies and ensure they are gender and poverty proofed.

Maintenance Recovery Unit

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) currently requires recipients of OFP to get maintenance from the father of the child. Treoir believes maintenance recovery should not be the remit of the DEASP as it can create conflict, which is counterproductive to building relationships between unmarried parents, which ultimately is in the best interest of the child.

We believe the Maintenance Recovery Unit should be relieved of its remit. As per the commitment in the *Programme for Government* we are calling for reform of the entire maintenance collection system. Treoir welcomed the establishment of the Child Maintenance Review Group and made a submission to it in March. We would now urge Minister Humphreys to encourage the Group to meet and consult with relevant stakeholders working with parent of children who are not married to each other.

Recommendations:

- The DEASP should no longer be involved in maintenance recovery.
- The requirement of lone parents in receipt of OFP to pursue maintenance should be abolished.
- The Child Maintenance Review Group Setup to consult with stakeholders and relevant NGO's working with parents of children who are not married to each other.
- Treoir is calling for urgent reform of the current child maintenance system addressing calculation, facilitation, enforcement, and collection.

Income Adequacy

Working Family Payment

Change to the eligibility criteria of the One Family Payment (OFP) has resulted in the reduction of income for lone parents in employment. A lone parent whose youngest child reaches the age of 7 loses OFP and may instead qualify for Jobseekers Transitional Payment (JST) if their youngest child is aged between 7 and 13, or Jobseekers Allowance (JA) if the child is 14 years or over.

Treoir believes the support available to lone parents who are progressing to sustainable employment needs to be more appropriate to their needs. While Working Family Payment (WFP) is available to OPF recipients who work a minimum of less than 38 hours a fortnight, it is not payable with JST or JA. This is a consequence of the reforms of the One Family Payment. Thus, a JST recipient working 19 hours a week on the minimum wage will experience significant hardship if their employer is not able to offer them extra hours. Moreover, in its current form the WFP working hours threshold may not adequately reflect current working trends. For instance, an OPF recipient who can only secure 18 hours work a week will not qualify for WFP.

Single Person Child Carer Credit (Department of Finance)

In January 2014, the Single Person Child Carer Credit, which is only available to the primary carer of the child, replaced the One Parent Family Tax Credit (OPFTC). This OPFTC had been available to both parents where they were not living together since the early 1970s. Treoir's National Specialist Information Service continues to receive calls from unmarried parents who highlight the negative consequences of not being able to avail of this tax credit. The impact of this is that it dis-incentivises shared parenting, reduces the overall income for parents who live apart and where there are two household to be maintained.

Recommendations:

- Implementation of the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland (2017).
- Reinstate supports for one-parent families to address the current high rates of child poverty.
- Extend WFP to lone parents in receipt of Jobseekers Transitional Payment (JST).
- Extend the cut off for the Jobseekers Transition Payment until their youngest child reaches 18, so that lone parents can access work fulltime or part-time, in-work income supports, and training opportunities.
- Link earning disregards and in-work income supports to increases in the National Minimum Wage, maintaining the value of these supports year on year.
- Reduce the hours' requirement for the Working Family Payment for lone parents to 30 hours a fortnight.
- Extend the Single Parent Child Carer tax credit to both parents who live separately to support shared parenting. (Department of Finance)

Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

The current income limits for the Back-to-School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BTSCFA) negatively impact lone parents. The BTSCFA sets out different limits of average weekly family income for couples and for lone parents. Conversely, the income limits for the calculation of the Working Family Payment (WFP) are based on the number of children in a family and it does not differentiate between households with two adults, and lone parent families. For instance, the BTSCFA income limit for a family with one child is €603.70 (for a couple) and €438.30 (for a lone parent). In contrast, the WFP income limit for a family with one child (whether a couple or a lone parent) is €521.

Recommendations:

- Equalise income thresholds for one and two parent families.
- Considering Covid-19's impact on family income restore the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to the 2011 level of €200 for children under 12, and to €305 for children over 12.

Widowed or Surviving Civil Partner Grant

This grant is a once-off payment of €8,000 available to widows, widowers or surviving civil partners who have one or more dependent children living with them. Cohabitant parents do not qualify for this

payment. In a 2018 landmark ruling in Northern Ireland, the High Court held that an unmarried mother whose partner of 23 years died was discriminated against on the grounds of marital status when she was refused a widowed parent's allowance.¹

Recommendation

- Extend the eligibility of the Widowed or Surviving Civil Partner Grant to cohabitants who have one or more dependent children living with them.

HOUSING

The Covid-19 pandemic gave increased urgency to the ongoing shortage of housing. The suite of emergency measures to deal with this are welcome but the ongoing reliance on the private rental market is not economically or socially sustainable and is not a solution to the state's housing crisis. As the housing crisis shows no signs of abating Government policy must shift from an almost total reliance on the private rental market, to one of large-scale state interventions.

Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government homeless statistics show that 62% of homeless families are headed by one parent and that there has been a 300% increase in the number of homeless families in the past four years.² The rise in family homelessness is driven by structural economic factors. According to Focus Ireland the overwhelming number of families becoming homeless had their last stable home in the private rented sector, and the crisis in this sector is the immediate cause of their homelessness – landlords selling up or properties being repossessed, shortage of properties to rent, scarcity of properties accepting rent supplement, and high rents.

It is imperative emergency measures introduced during the pandemic are maintained and homeless figures are not allowed to increase. In most mainland European countries, housing, and access to it is considered a basic human right and an important foundation block in sustaining family and community life. Irish society must move from a culture where housing is seen as a commodity and a source of investment to one where the right to a home is a basic human right enshrined in the constitution.

Recommendations

- Treoir is calling on the Government to dramatically reduce the state's excessive reliance on HAP. Since its introduction in 2014 the state has spent over €750 million on the scheme which inflates rents in the private rental sector and transfers large sums of public monies to landlords.

¹ UKSC 2017/0035, See also Irish Times 30/8/2018 "Unmarried Mother wins right to Widows Allowance".

² Focus Ireland (2019) Latest Figures on Homelessness in Ireland <https://www.focusireland.ie/resourcehub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>

- As per commitments in the *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*, Treoir is calling on the government to honour its commitment on the delivery of public and affordable housing.
- Treoir is calling on the Government to ensure via legislation tenants have security of tenure; to extend the ban on rent increases; and to increase progress towards a cost-rental system.
- Introduce an emergency fund to assist lone parents with rent arrears as per the recommendation from The National Economic and Social Council (NESC).

Maintenance and Rent allowances

As already noted, rents have increased throughout the country with higher rates in Dublin and other urban centers. Unmarried liable relatives who pay maintenance towards their dependent children are allowed €95.23 per week in rent payment in assessing the amount of maintenance due. In the current context, this allowance for rental expenditure is wholly inadequate. Treoir has received numerous calls from liable relatives who are struggling to maintain their rental accommodation while paying the assessed maintenance by DEASP using the current rent allowances framework. Frequently we come across cases through our National Information Service where single fathers who share custody arrangements are not awarded Rent Supplement at family rates. A single father may not qualify for social housing with the result that he may not be able to have his child stay with him.

Back to Education and SUSI

Students experiencing a crisis pregnancy have limited options. They can opt for One Parent Family payment (if choosing to live separately) or Working Family Payment (if cohabiting). However, as many students do not meet the criteria for this, they are left to rely on college grants (if available), managing college duties and weekend work to survive. A minority of students may obtain the exceptional needs social welfare payment, depending on the Community Welfare Officer. However, the reality is that there is a significant gap in support for this cohort.

A lone parent returning to education and getting a social welfare payment may qualify for the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) or the student grant depending on the circumstances. However, it is not possible to get the Back to Education Allowance and a full student grant at the same time and BTEA recipients are not eligible to receive the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) maintenance grant. Without this financial support, lone parents in full time education are forced to drop out of college.

Lone parents with third level education are three times more likely to be in employment, but 1-in-5 lone parents could not access formal education due to cost. This was the third highest rate among all

EU-15 countries. Worryingly, census data shows that participation of lone parents in education has decreased by approximately 20% in the 5 years from 2011 to 2016.³

Recommendations

- Grant lone parents in full-time education the Back to Education Allowance without discretion
- Review the eligibility rules of the SUSI grant to better facilitate lone parents who are part-time students to provide financial support for flexible care duties.
- Address the anomaly by which lone parents in receipt of Rent Supplement and OFP/JST, who want to take up education or training, are not eligible for SUSI maintenance.
- Allow those under 23 who are not dependents, i.e., teen parents, to apply independently, without their parents being assessed. Currently they require documentation to prove they are estranged from their parents when they may be living independently. Under current rules they are recognised as a separate family unit by the Department of Social Protection, but not by the Department of Education.

CHILDCARE

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted that affordable, reliable, and decent childcare is still not universally available to parents. As with so many other key services the state's reliance on the private market has led to anxiety and uncertainty amongst parents about whether or not they will have access to affordable and dependable childcare post lockdown. The current situation is extremely worrying for lone parents, especially for those already struggling and dependent on part-time work to supplement their household income.

In 2019 Treoir gave a guarded welcome to the National Childcare Scheme. We did however express concerns that under the Scheme important anti-poverty after-school measures aimed specifically at low-income families such as the Community Childcare Subvention programme and the Childcare, Employment and Training Scheme (CETS) were due to be withdrawn. While some changes were made, the fact remains that the National Childcare Scheme, is fraught with problems and not fit for purpose.

Ireland spends just under 0.2 per cent of GDP (0.25 per cent of GNI*) on pre-primary education compared to an OECD average of 0.8 per cent of GDP. Early childhood is the stage where education can most effectively influence the development of children and help reverse disadvantage. Government should increase investment in ECCE to meet the OECD average by 2025.

Recommendations

³ Census 2016 Profile 4 – Households and Families. CSO Statbank <http://www.cso.ie/en/databases/>

- Ireland spends just under 0.2 per cent of GDP on pre-primary education compared to an OECD average of 0.8 per cent of GDP. Treoir is calling on the government to increase investment in ECCE to meet the OECD average by 2025.
- Extend anti-poverty after school measures aimed at low-income families indefinitely.
- Introduce a single childcare subvention scheme for single parents who need childcare for children aged up to 12 years to participate in education, training, and work.
- Introduce additional after-school childcare in the community to support lone parents.
- Replace the National Childcare Scheme with a publicly funded model and introduce universal access for all children as a right and based on need and not on parental income.

DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT AFFAIRS AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

The Labour Market

Unmarried parents with children often have difficulty accessing the labour market. This may-be due to a skill deficit, a lack of work experience, lack of confidence, low educational attainment, poverty and/or a general lack of childcare and other supports. This means they are particularly vulnerable to the economic fallout from Covid-19 due to a lack of access to childcare, and the specific impact of the pandemic on the retail and hospitality sectors, where they tend to be heavily concentrated.

Employment and connection to or involvement in the labour market is constantly cited by government ministers as a route out of poverty. However, for this to be the case it is imperative that work pays. Precarious low paid employment is not good for workers, and neither is it good for the state as it ends up paying millions of Euros in social transfers through Family Income Support. Considering the over concentration of women in the ranks of the low paid and the importance of employment for lone and unmarried parents to provide for their families, Treoir is calling on the government to introduce the following measures.

Recommendations

- Introduce legislation to prevent employers dismissing lone parents who are unable to return to work due to lack of childcare.
- Benchmark the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and social welfare to the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living so that everyone can access an adequate income.
- The abolition of staggered rates of the NMW for people under the age of 20 to be replaced by a single hourly rate for everyone in line with the Living Wage.
- The Government to strengthen the role of the Low Pay Commission in relation to in-work poverty and to review the low pay of women.
- The rigorous implementation of the recommendations in the *Social Inclusion Strategy: A Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*.

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

Legal Aid

Access to accessible and timely legal aid is of critical importance for unmarried parents. Cuts to the legal-aid system have led Dr Geffory Shannon to describe the family law system as impoverished and without the capacity to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of society. The lack of investment in the family courts system and under resourcing of civil legal aid has serious implications for the operation of the family law system and the functioning of the Family Mediation Service. Both services are crippled by an acute lack of resources, long waiting lists, and out of date eligibility criteria. The Family Mediation Service has a critical role to play in minimising conflict between parents and in fostering and supporting shared parenting. A properly functioning national mediation service has the potential to take pressure away from the family court system and to be a critical element in fostering familial harmony and shared parenting. It is therefore imperative that ongoing work to modernise the courts system and legal aid continue apace and that sufficient resources are allocated to ensure this is the case.

Recommendations

- Review the eligibility criteria for civil legal aid to bring it into line with the current cost of living.
- Implementation of the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice and Equality on Reform of the Family Law System.
- In Budget 2021 funding for the Legal Aid Board was increased by six per cent to €44.6 million. Treoir is calling on the government to increase the allocation for 2022 by at least €10 million to clear the waiting lists for family mediation and to ensure the service is properly resourced.
- Budget 2021 allocated €2.7 million in increased funding to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as support for victims. Following our ratification of the Istanbul Convention, Ireland is obligated to have 472 places for victims of domestic violence, but it has only 141. Considering the upsurge in domestic abuse and the dire need for more refuge spaces Treoir is calling on the government to allocate €5 million in this budget to the issue.

Ensuring Equity and Security for Kinship Families

Unfortunately, the lack of available, reliable data, makes it difficult to accurately represent the numbers of kinship families, in Ireland. Treoir is aware of the sacrifices being made by a large cohort of grandmothers, in particular, as well as other relatives, who step in to care for children and young people, when parents cannot. We are concerned about the evidence emerging from our dedicated project for Kinship Families (Kinship Care Ireland), which indicates that becoming a kinship carer frequently leads to families experiencing poverty and adversity.

Treoir asks that kinship carers should be entitled to adequate and equitable financial supports, equal to that offered to foster carers, which would positively impact on a significant number of children and young people in kinship families, whose needs are not being sufficiently addressed, through current exchequer-funded provision.