



JUNE 2023

Pre-Budget submission to the Department of Social Protection Budget 2024



About Treoir

Treoir was founded in 1976 and is the national federation of services for unmarried parents and their families. Treoir along with its member agencies, promotes the rights and welfare of unmarried parents and their children and advocates on their behalf. Treoir recognises the diversity of Irish families and believes that all families, including non-marital families, should be valued equally and receive the same level of protection and support from the state. Treoir provides information to non-married parents on areas of family law, available supports for families, and supports for successful shared parenting. We endeavour to always look for ways to enhance our information provision and help families to realise their rights.

Treoir works to achieve this by:

- Providing a National Specialist information Service to parents who are not married to each other, their families and those working with them by providing information through our phone service, website, and outreach workshops.
- Co-ordination of the National Teen Parent Support Programme.
- Co-ordination the National Management of Kinship Care Ireland.
- Promoting and supporting shared parenting.
- Undertaking and promoting research to examine issues that impact non-marital families.
- Advocating for legal and social changes which support lone parent families and their children.

Introduction

Treoir welcomes the opportunity to make a written pre-budget submission to the Department of Social Protection in advance of Budget 2024. Treoir advocates that Budget 2024 should be a child-focused budget, which will reduce child poverty rates. This will require an analysis of poverty and deprivation that focuses on children's experiences and their needs and puts in place measures to address this in an integrated way. Treoir welcomes the establishment of the child poverty and wellbeing unit in the Department of An Taoiseach. This unit will examine the issues that impact children living in poverty and produce robust strategies and measures to lift children and their families out of poverty.

Children are the most likely group within our population to experience poverty, and children living in one-parent households face an even greater risk of poverty. The figures from the Central Statistics Office Survey on Income and Living Conditions Report, 2022 showed an

increase in poverty and deprivation rates.¹ For example, 13.1% of people were at risk of poverty, an increase of 1.5% since 2021.

The ‘at risk of poverty’ rates are back to pre-COVID levels, this indicates that the financial supports introduced during the pandemic did in fact make a difference to poverty rates. The withdrawal of these extra supports has contributed to a rise in poverty and deprivation rates. Poverty and homelessness are strongly linked and often families are having to top-up their Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) to secure a home and as a result they are pushed further into poverty.

Context for Budget 2024

The cost-of-living crisis has compounded the difficulties that low-income families face, the rising cost of food and energy has forced families to make impossible choices between feeding their family and heating their home. The budget for 2024, must introduce measures to address rising poverty rates and provide more than just short-term fixes as was the case in Budget 2023. The Irish economy is thriving, and unemployment is the lowest it has been in years, yet poverty and deprivation are on the increase. Adequate social welfare payments, targeted at reducing child poverty are vital to ensuring children's needs are met.² Child poverty can have far reaching effects, children who live in poverty are more likely to continue to live in poverty throughout their lives, and they are more likely to die younger, or live with a chronic illness.

Children’s rights have progressed in Ireland since the referendum in 2012 and subsequent legislation, that places an emphasis on children as rights bearers. In line with this and ensuring children are not at risk of poverty, social welfare payments for children need to be increased. The cost-of-living crisis has highlighted the vulnerability of many low-income families, and as we come out of the Covid-19 pandemic we can see that those who have been impacted the most are those who can least afford it.

Social policies that impact individuals' well-being and quality of life, should be the responsibility of the entire government, adopting a whole of government approach, with government departments working together to identify gaps and ensure that policies in different

¹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2022/poverty/>

²

https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/Child%20Poverty%20Monitor%202023.pdf

departments do not have a negative impact on measures designed to alleviate hardship and struggles facing disadvantaged groups daily. It is vital that all government departments are briefed on how social policies interact with each other, for example, the interaction of social welfare benefits and housing supports and how they impact on education and training eligibility. Treoir welcomes the role of the Child Poverty Unit in the Department of An Taoiseach in improving such co-ordination.

Treoir recognises the vulnerability of certain families, and the unique challenges they face, in particular, one-parent families, Kinship care families, and young parents. Every person has the right to a dignified life and a decent standard of living. Benchmarking the social protection system to the cost of living can go some way to ensuring this happens. Current social welfare rates have not been kept in line with the cost of living, and as a result, people's spending power has reduced as outlined in the MESL (Minimum Essential Standard of Living) report due to be published on the 15th of June.³

Key recommendations

Kinship Care

Treoir primarily focuses on non-marital families, recognising the diversity of family structure in modern Ireland. All families should be recognised and valued. Treoir hosts Kinship Care Ireland and believes this is a family type that has been unsupported and not recognised for the role they play. Kinship care is the full-time care of children by grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, or other close family and friends. It occurs when there is no parent to care for the child at that time. This situation occurs as a result of the death of a parent, illness, imprisonment, or lack of capacity due to substance misuse or mental illness.

Kinship Care is both formal and informal. 'Relative Foster Care' is formal Kinship Care and comes with a range of financial and other supports that are not available to children in informal Kinship Care. There are many benefits to the child being cared for within their family and kin network. There is a lack of awareness of the monetary impact and economic pressure experienced by kinship carers, who take on the role of carer to these children voluntarily. Kinship carers do a great service to the child and society, and this should be recognised through state support. Treoir is committed to making these kinship care families visible and valued.

The payment available to kinship carers is the Guardian's Payment (formally Orphans'

³ <https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/category/annualmesupdate/>

Payment) at a weekly rate of €203 per week and there is no increase for children 12 years and over. The basic rate of pay needs to be equal to the foster care payment. The Guardian's Payment needs to be increased in line with Foster Care Allowance payment with an additional increase for children over 12 years old.

The Foster Care Allowance payable for children in foster care placements is as follows:

Age of child	Weekly rate
Under 12 years	€325 per child
12 years and over	€352 per child

At a minimum, the Guardian's Payment should equate to the Jobseeker Allowance for kinship carers, currently at €220 with the qualified child allowance of €42 for those under 12 and €50 for those over 12. Treoir is recommending that the qualified child allowance be increased for all on jobseekers allowance to half the qualified adult rate (50%) for those under 12 (€73) and 56% increase for those over 12 (€83) at the current rates.

Age of child	Weekly rate
Under 12 years	€293 per child
12 years and over	€303 per child

The process for qualification for Guardian's Payment can be difficult and time-consuming, with requests for proof of eligibility often difficult to obtain and an absence of Social Worker support in what is deemed informal kinship care arrangements. Priority needs to be given to these families in processing their payments to avoid financial hardship, to recognise the contribution they make and how they save the state a considerable amount of money by providing this care to the child.

The Guardian's Payment needs to be prioritised and fast-tracked for kinship carers to recognise the vital role they play and trigger additional supports such as access to a medical card and therapeutic supports. Other supports should be explored such as clothing allowances, financial supports for children's wellbeing and mental health and a deeper understanding of needs by

the local Community Welfare Officers. In short, kinship carers should not suffer financial hardship because they stepped into the care role for a relative's child.

One-Parent Families

One-parent family households continue to be the families that are most at risk of poverty. Children in one-parent families are four times more likely to experience poverty than those in two-parent families.⁴ The cost-of-living crisis has disproportionately impacted one-parent families, leaving many struggling to make ends meet. The measures taken in Budget 2023 did little to alleviate poverty levels in one-parent families, the one-off payments though welcome, were not the long-term response that was needed to mitigate the rising cost of food and energy.⁵

One-parent families experience many complex challenges while parenting alone, they carry the load financially, physically, emotionally, and mentally, with often little or no support or downtime. Those who parent alone often must choose between heat or food, or they will go without meals to ensure their children have enough to eat. The stigma that lone parents face is still experienced and can compound social exclusion. Child poverty has an impact on children's participation in social activities and sports which affects children's social, physical, and mental well-being. Those parenting alone, and their families should be prioritised in Budget 2024, recognising their vulnerability to poverty, and the challenges they face while caring for their children alone.

It is important to bear in mind the barriers and poverty traps that one-parent families and other marginalised groups experience. Loss of medical card, lack of affordable suitable childcare, loss of housing supports, are issues that are not the direct responsibility of the Department of Social Protection, but they do act as a mechanism that traps people in an inter-generational cycle of poverty. The cost of childcare also remains as one of the biggest barriers to work, education and training for lone parents, yet work, education, and training are the most effective ways to lift families out of poverty. One-parent family households are particularly vulnerable, and policies need to reflect the unique challenges they face. This is why a whole of government approach is needed to identify and mitigate these challenges.

⁴ Central Statistics Office (2023), *Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2022*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2022/>

⁵ Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, (2022) *Budget 2023 Expenditure Report*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/eb6ec-budget-2023-expenditure-reports/>

Treoir believes that lone parents should be supported in work, education, and training, while recognising their care responsibilities. This again involves cooperation and policy alignment from different government departments to create supports and services to allow lone parents to proactively improve their family's situation. A whole of government approach is the only way to tackle the multifaceted nature of poverty and give people agency to improve their lives and that of their families. For example, the announcement last year of free books for primary schools is very welcome. However, the cost of post-primary back-to-school costs is an area of great financial stress to many families.

Treoir acknowledges the removal of the requirement of One-Parent Family Payment claimants to pursue child maintenance and welcomes the plan to exclude child maintenance as means for the One Parent Family Payment. Treoir recommends that child maintenance should be excluded as means for all social welfare payments, housing supports and medical card applications.

Young parents

The Teen Parents Support Programme (TPSP) consists of twelve separate projects across ten counties in the Republic of Ireland, located in a range of statutory, non-statutory, and community and voluntary organisations providing supports and services within their communities. The TPSP, funded by Tusla and the Health Services Executive (HSE), is coordinated by Treoir, and overseen by the TPSP National Advisory Committee. Each TPSP project offers interventions that promote and enhance the well-being of pregnant and parenting teens and their children. As part of an interagency approach to family support, TPSP staff begin their engagement with the young people at a critical early point of pregnancy/parenthood. They then work with young parents to build their capacity both as parents and as adolescents moving towards early adulthood.

Many young parents we work with and support through the TPSP manage to return to education before they turn 18 years of age, yet they do not qualify for Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) due to the 18+ eligibility criteria. We would like to see the age lowered to include younger parents returning to education. The number of such young parents is quite low so this would be of minimal cost to the Department, but of huge value to young parents who would find BTEA, and the Cost of Education Allowance a big incentive in returning to their education.

Young parents, especially mothers, are particularly vulnerable in terms of housing and often find themselves in emergency accommodation during pregnancy and following the birth of

their child. The TPSP supported many mothers moving out of emergency accommodation once they found a place to live. While in emergency homeless accommodation, young parents have access to basic household items, however, once they find their home, they need to purchase items such as bedding, cooking utensils, cleaning products etc. We would like to ask the Department to allow young parents access to the Additional Needs Payment when moving out of homeless accommodation into their new home.

In Summary

As a matter of priority, Treoir recommends the following:

- Ensure child maintenance payments are not included as means for any social welfare allowance.
- Extend the fuel allowance to families in receipt of Working Family Payment, as a targeted measure to reduce energy poverty.
- Support kinship care families by prioritising and fast-tracking the Guardian's Payment. Increase the Guardian's Payment in line with the Foster Care Payment or at a minimum the Jobseeker Allowance.
- Increased Guardian's Payment in line with jobseekers allowance for children over 12, recognising the additional expense of raising teenagers. Increase Guardian's Payment in line with Jobseekers Allowance for children over 12, recognising the additional expense of raising teenagers.
- Provide medical card and therapeutic supports for children and young people in receipt of the Guardian's Payment.
- Provide an increase for qualified children to include children in receipt of the Guardian's Payment.
- Increase core social welfare rates in line with the cost of living.
- Index link the QCI (Qualified child increase) to 50% of the dependent adult payment for under 12s and 56% for over 12s.
- Extend the living alone allowance to one-parent families.
- Extend child benefit to over 18's in post-primary education and in receipt of the back-to-school allowance.
- Lower the qualifying age of BTEA and the Cost of Education Allowance which accompanies BTEA for younger mothers.

- Make Additional Needs Payment available to young parents exiting homeless accommodation into rented accommodation.

Conclusion

Treoir recommends that Budget 2024 be a child-focused budget, with targeted measures that will alleviate poverty for vulnerable households. It is vital that it is a whole of government approach in order to achieve this. It is important to bear in mind the barriers and poverty traps that people experience. The loss of a medical card, if a parent returns to work, the lack of affordable suitable childcare and the loss of housing supports, are not the responsibility of the Department of Social Protection. But the lack of these supports trap people in an inter-generational cycle of poverty.

The removal of the pandemic financial supports and the cost-of-living crisis have come together to create a ‘perfect storm’ for poverty and deprivation levels to increase.⁶ We need to move away from the culture of stigmatising welfare recipients towards a recognition of a dignified, adequate standard of living. In a modern, wealthy Ireland with a thriving economy and low unemployment, rising poverty and deprivation are morally wrong.

Treoir again thanks the Department of Social Protection for the opportunity to give a written pre-budget submission and we hope that our recommendations will be considered and adopted in Budget 2024.

⁶ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-pihs/povertyindicatorsbyhealthstatus-surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2022/keyfindings/>