

One Family was founded in 1972 as Cherish. We provide support, information and a range of services to people who parent alone, those who share parenting, those going through separation; as well as to people experiencing an unplanned or crisis pregnancy.

Lone parents experience multiple disadvantages in Irish society. Barriers to education are a central part of this systemic disadvantage.

We welcome the opportunity to submit to the *Joint Committee on Education & Skills* and the time to focus on one-parent families who make up 1/4 of all families with children in Ireland. One in five children lives in a one-parent family<sup>1</sup>.

Social and economic isolation and exclusion affect lone parents in a disproportionate way. Both national and international research repeatedly identifies lone parent families as a group with the highest risks of consistent poverty.

Related to this, One Family recognises that family forms are changing internationally, with a rise in divorce rates, more separated families sharing parenting, as well as people parenting alone. The traditional breadwinner family model has always carried economically hidden carer work. One-parent families simply make visible what was previously invisible. We see the everyday impact of this in our work and can see the pressures on lone parents who are always both carers and breadwinners.

National policies aimed at reducing poverty identify “active inclusion” and “activation” as key ways to bring marginalised people towards education, the labour market and employment. One-parent families clearly demonstrate the central stumbling blocks to these policies. The caring work involved in raising children takes time, resources and energy. The idea of a lone parent in isolation as a fully available worker is a myth and the necessity for a whole of government, wraparound web of supports and services is by now fully acknowledged.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of access to education. Lone parents are caught in a system which seems to subvert their every attempt to access and complete the education they want and need to progress in life, and improve outcomes for themselves and their children. This is very concerning as we have seen education rates for lone parents decrease in recent years<sup>2</sup>. Taking an education first approach will improve employment rates for one-parent families in the longer term.

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<sup>1</sup> Census 2016. <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

The specific needs for lone parents to succeed in their educational goals are well-known by most: secure and affordable housing; flexible, affordable quality child care; student grants and scholarships provided at realistic levels for parents; high quality support by Intreo; and on-campus supports which again acknowledge the specific needs of lone parents as students and carers.

These are detailed not just in One Family's written submission but also in Maynooth University's review<sup>3</sup>. There are many opportunities to increase lone parent's participation in education but there are a few obvious issues that need to be urgently resolved:

- The Department of Education and Skills and Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection need to collaborate and resolve issues around housing tenure and access to various grants. Cross-departmental integration on this is crucial.
- The inequity for lone parents who have transferred to Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) must be addressed.
- There is an urgent need to train Intreo frontline staff and case workers on the complex requirements of, services required and supports available to lone parents.
- Recognise the need for, and fund, specialist bridging programmes such as those provided by One Family and others as part of the education-first pathway for lone parents.
- Improve access to education for those lone parents highlighted in the recent Indecon report<sup>4</sup> who have been forced into low paid, precarious work as a result of the OFP reforms, many of whom are in receipt of the Working Family Payment and so cannot access BTEA.

**Ends**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/supports-barriers-lone-parents-accessing-HEd.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/DEASP\\_OFPR\\_Review.pdf](https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/DEASP_OFPR_Review.pdf)