

Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas

Committee on Social Protection

Theme: lone parents and their children

8th November 2016

Introduction

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to present to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection to inform its work in the area of lone parents and their children. Barnardos worked with over 13,000 children and families in 2015 and at least 35% of these were lone parent households. Barnardos offers a range of services such as family support, early years services, one-to-one parenting support, a dedicated bereavement services for children and a Guardian ad Litem service.

Profile

Barnardos believes that any discussion on lone parents must start by realising they are not a homogenous group. They are parenting alone because they are single, separated, divorced, or widowed and they span all age categories. And from the child's perspective, the reality is many of these parents are actually co-parenting their children with their ex-partners.

Although we know approximately 1 in 5 children are living in a lone parent household. The diversity behind that front door is striking. 53% of lone parents are in employment but over 40% of lone parents have not completed second level education and this in turn impacts on the types of jobs available to them. Majority of lone parents who are in employment are in skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled work which offers low wages.

Unfortunately this combination of low levels of education, low wages and welfare dependency means that many children living in one parent family households are almost twice as likely to live in poverty than other children- 23% of children in a one-parent family experience deprivation. (EU SILC 2014). Furthermore, 59% (almost three in five) of lone parent households with one or more children experienced enforced deprivation compared to 29% of the general population. (EU SILC 2014).

In terms of the impact on their wellbeing, research has found children in lone-parent families are more likely to be suffering from some type of long-term illness or disability (20%) than those in married or cohabiting families (15%). There was also a significantly higher level of social difficulties and more likely to engage in unhealthy dietary habits.

What does it mean for these families?

Living on the breadline, means living day to day, unable to save, in constant stress about being able to provide for your family, parental feelings of inadequacy and dreading any unexpected bills, kids

birthday invites or special occasions. Children are perspective to these stresses and often internalise their feelings and actions as don't want to add further financial pressure on their parent.

As one parent aptly described: "Not being able to provide things for your child is an everyday life struggle. I don't believe in spoiling children but you should be able to buy them at least something or let them do an activity or sport they enjoy and if you do then something else has to suffer. You just haven't got the money. Once you pay your bills the next thing is buying food for the week and then you can literally count the pennies on one hand that's left. You want to be able to have the price of an ice-cream for your child or pay the €2 a week for soccer, it's only a bit of change but most weeks you just can't do it. To say no to your own child so often is just heart-breaking especially when they have been so good."

Another lone parent said "Not being able to afford medicines for my son because they are not covered on the medical card makes me feel inadequate and makes him more vulnerable"

What has been done?

At a policy level, we know there are concerns about the rise in jobless households in Ireland and a continuing mantra that a job is the route out of poverty. This led to reforms to the One Parent Family Payment with the aim to increase their participation in the labour market. These OPFP reforms rolled out from 2011 to 2015 altering the eligibility for OPFP by lowering the age of the youngest child from 18 to 7 years. Pushing through these reforms, failed to recognise that lone parents are also full time carers to their children and this work / family responsibilities are harder on them than on coupled or married families. In our view, the biggest flaw to this reform was it not being accompanied with sufficient supports and quality affordable childcare to enable and support lone parents to take up training or employment. Also a major unintended consequence to the reform has been many lone parents in employment ending up being financially worse off resulting in many leaving their jobs and increasing their welfare dependency.

More recent policy developments and announcements have ameliorated this to some small extent. For instance, Budget 2017 saw the partial restoration of the income disregard applicable to lone parents from €90 to €110. This one measure will help keep some lone parents in employment.

Also there has been an increase the investment of subsidised childcare to help address the exorbitant high fees charged to parents. While investment in the sector is much needed and the preferred option over the other approaches such as tax credits, Ireland is starting from a very low base so it will be a while before parents feel the real benefit. It is also crucial that the new Single Affordable Childcare Programme guarantees that the current recipients of the different childcare schemes are not worse off. Also crucial to its success is ensuring it is integrated with other systems to facilitate parental transitions, school holidays etc. Flexibility in childcare provision needs to be built into the system to ensure school pick-ups, school holidays, shift work patterns.

What can be done?

When considering how we, as a society, can improve the outcomes for children in lone parent families we must remember that family type is not the strongest predictor on a child's wellbeing. Mother's educational level and the quality of the parent-child relationship are more important to a child's development than any other factors. Therefore the promotion of positive and confident parenting and availability of timely interventions is one of the most effective steps that the State can take to improve outcomes for children. It is this combination that can break down cycles of disadvantage and poverty benefiting all children not just those in lone parent families.

The evidence is unequivocal; there are few differences in the ability of babies across the socio-economic spectrum at birth. However, by the age of three, some worrying differences emerge as a child's life experiences are shaped by their parents and their environment.

For Barnardos, we agree with one mother's assessment that inequality is embedded across societal structures and it raises the question:

"Why are children's future so predicated on what their parent's earn or where they live? Don't all children deserve to be cherished equally and given the same opportunities to thrive and reach their individual potential irrespective of their household income or parent's marital status?"

What would make a difference?

The key to creating a level playing field and tackling child poverty is through the combination of adequate income supports and quality accessible public services.

In the area of income supports, Barnardos makes the following 4 recommendations:

1. The cost of going to work is higher on lone parents as they don't have another income to avail of. So costs such as transport, childcare etc need to be factored in when taking up work. Subsequently in-work supports such as Family Income Supplement are crucial to ensure the take up of work sees an increase in household income. Greater flexibility with the 19 hours criteria applicable for FIS is needed to ensure more lone parents can take up work even if it is low paid.
2. Child Benefit – given the additional costs associated with rearing teenagers, a higher rate of child benefit should be paid to those children over the age of 12. This has been long recommended by the Vincentian Partnership of Social Justice who calculate that families with teenagers are living further below the poverty line than other types of families.
3. The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance rates should be increased. Barnardos has consistently raised the issue of huge financial burden of school costs on parents and our call for the provision of a genuinely free primary education system as envisaged and enshrined in the Irish Constitution. Until that is attained, as an interim measure the BSCFA should be increased because it was harshly cut during the recession and as it is a targeted payment it hurt those most in need. The current rates of €100 per primary pupil and €200 per secondary school pupil are too little when compared against the current costs of school uniforms, shoes and all the other associated costs.
4. Barnardos was delighted to see the extension of the School Meals Programme to some non-DEIS schools in Budget 2017. We are awaiting further information on this but it is welcomed when we know over 55% of children from disadvantaged areas do not attend a DEIS school.

In the area of services, investment in the following is crucial to tackling child poverty and improving the lives of all children but particularly those in lone parent households.

1. Quality affordable childcare and afterschool care. As mentioned already, this sector did receive a much needed boost in Budget 2017 but must only be seen as a stepping stone towards the roll out of a comprehensive quality subsidised model of childcare and afterschool care. Without this, there can be no expectation on lone parents to take up full time work as understandably their caring duties will take precedence. Barnardos particularly welcomed the universal aspect to the childcare proposals announced in Budget 2017 as it finally recognised the value of early years care and education on child development as opposed to simply facilitating parent's to return to work. We know the first

three years of a child's life are crucial in determining their future outcomes, investment in quality childcare improves the child's social and emotional development and enhances their school readiness. This in turn improves their long term outcomes and generates exchequer savings into the future.

However, continued investment in this area is required to keep Ireland apace with other European countries who spend on average 0.8% GDP on this sector compared to 0.3% in Ireland. Issues such as ensuring high quality provision across the sector, the regulation of childminders and the development of a comprehensive out of school care system is needed to guarantee improved outcomes for children and support to lone parents.

2. Availability of timely Family Support: all parents struggle at different times some more than others. Some can rely on family and friends to assist them through these times but others need more intensive targeted support. Evaluations of effective parenting supports show clear benefits to families in addressing issues and stemming problems escalating. Barnardos is a strong advocate of Prevention and Early Intervention approaches and believes investment in key supports such as the ABC programmes, Tusla family support workers and other programmes such as Triple P or the Partnership with Parents as run by Barnardos should be beefed up.
3. Lastly, childhood is time limited so any delay in accessing appropriate supports for example in the education system or health supports can seriously impede the child's development and is a significant stressor on family life particularly lone parents who are on their own. Barnardos works with many families whose children are languishing on lengthy waiting lists to get either assessed or treated for a range of issues spanning speech and language, mental health supports or educational supports. We are also working with families living in hotels or in over-crowded situations, desperately trying to secure alternative accommodation that is simply not there. The reality is, there is no simple solutions to tackling child poverty. Every family is different and accordingly diverse solutions are required. Only through a combination of adequate incomes supports and accessible quality public services will children's lives improve and break the cycles of intergenerational poverty that is so prevalent among lone parent families.