

# Submission on the General Scheme of a Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2022



## 1. Introduction

One Family welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Committee Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the General Scheme of a Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2022. We welcome the development of this legislation as it represents a positive change towards greater support for people parenting alone or sharing parenting and a move towards better recognition and understanding of their caring responsibilities. We do, however, feel there are key amendments required to be fully inclusive of one-parent families and equitable towards them in the context of their additional caring responsibilities.

## 2. About One Family

One Family is Ireland's organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting, and separating. We were established in 1972 as Cherish and provide specialist parenting, therapeutic and family support services around Ireland. Children are at the core of our work, and we seek to improve their lives by empowering, supporting and up-skilling their parents. We campaign against child poverty, for reform of the family justice system and for the State to recognise and cherish all families equally, regardless of their marital status. More information on One Family can be found at [www.onefamily.ie](http://www.onefamily.ie). This submission is informed by our direct work with one-parent families and our role representing these families at a local and national level over the last 50 years.

## 3. General Comments

- (a) One Family recommends that, where appropriate, with the Bill or the policies which flow from the enactment of the Bill, there is special recognition and provision for the additional care responsibilities of parents in one-parent families. These additional caring responsibilities are often overlooked but directly contribute to the high rate of child poverty and poorer outcomes in these families. In short, people parenting alone are doubly disadvantaged; firstly, by being the sole carer in their household and secondly by legislation and policies which are often blind to the two-fold caring responsibilities they experience compared to two-parent households.
- (b) One key instance of such a policy blind spot is the Family Leave and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2021 which transposes elements of the EU Directive. While outside of the scope of the Work Life Balance legislation we believe the experience of one-parent families relating to this Act is relevant. The Act was introduced in by the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Justice to improve gender equality. Under the legislation leave entitlement follows the parent rather than the child; meaning, children in one-parent families receive half the dedicated time with a caregiver as parents in two-parent families during a vital time in their early development.

One Family and our partners in the National One Parent Family Alliance (NOPFA) have continually called for this inequality to be removed. Equal paid parental leave to benefit the children of lone parents was recommended by the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality.<sup>1</sup> In its deliberations on the Family Leave Miscellaneous Provisions Act the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth agreed that children in one-parent families should have equal access to time with their parent, which is supported by the State, as children in two-parent families.<sup>2</sup>

The benefit of dedicated time with a caregiver in a child's first year are well documented and more pronounced in children at risk of poverty, who experience adverse childhood experiences or other disadvantages. Paid leave, and all other family leave entitlements, should be viewed as a support for the child, and not solely gender equality or employment benefit measure for parents. Each child should be given equal access to a caregiver in their first year to refocus Parents Leave on the wellbeing and long-term outcomes of the child.

#### **4. Head 3 – Amendment of PART II of the Parental Leave Act 1998 – Parental Leave and Force Majeure Leave – right to request flexible working arrangements for caring purposes**

- (a) One Family welcomes the inclusion of persons to whom the employee is in loco parentis in the list of relationships eligible to qualify to request flexible working arrangements for caring purposes (3). Stepparents, grandparents and other family members often play a crucial role in the care of children in one-parent families. It is important that in the promotion of the Bill to employees and employers, the loco parentis role is clearly outlined to ensure everyone who is eligible due to an in loco parentis role can benefit from the new entitlement.
- (b) One Family recommends the delay of six months continuous employment with the employer from whose employment the leave is taken (4) is removed. Caring responsibilities and lack of access to quality affordable ECEC is one of the most significant barriers to education and employment for one-parent families and, as a result, it is a key contributing factor to child poverty. Cuts to the One Parent Family Payment implemented in 2012 were made alongside the promise of high quality, freely accessible ECEC to support parents' participation in the labour market. Despite increased investment in ECEC over the last decade, the average state expenditure per child in Ireland is lower than the OECD average. Critically, Ireland has one of the highest costs of ECEC in the OECD.<sup>3</sup> It is One Family's view that retaining the six-month employment eligibility criteria will prevent lone parents taking up employment and therefore directly contribute to the ongoing high rates of poverty (13.1%) and deprivation (44.9%) in this cohort.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality, (2021). *Report of the Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality*.

2 Committee on Children, Equality, Disability and Youth, (2021). *Report on the Parents Leave and Benefit Bill*.

3 OECD, (2021). *Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland*.

4 Central Statistics Office, (2022). *EU SILC 2021*.

- (c) One Family recommends that companies should be required to keep a log of requests for flexible working arrangements, which lists the department (where applicable), the outcome of the request and, if relevant, grounds for refusal. The log should be published on their website, accessible to the Workplace Relations Commission and subject to audit where necessary, to ensure fair access to flexible working arrangement for all staff, regardless of their seniority or position within the company. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth should collect data on flexible working arrangements for caring purposes disaggregated by gender, income, family status, ethnicity etc. to ensure policymakers have a clear picture about how effectively and equitably the scheme is rolled out.

**5. Head 4 – Amendment of PART II of the Parental Leave Act 1998 – Parental Leave and Force Majeure Leave – Leave for medical care purposes.**

- (a) One Family recommends leave for medical care purposes should be paid leave. People parenting alone are the sole earners in their household. It is not practicable to expect lone parents to take unpaid leave to care for their children. As previously noted, households headed by one adult with children are the households who experience the highest poverty and deprivation rates. As a consequence, they are also more likely to experience food poverty, be at risk of homelessness and live in poorly heated and insulated homes.<sup>5</sup> It is unacceptable to force parents to choose between taking time off work to care for a sick child or being able to afford food or heat for that same child.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way children are cared for when they have minor illnesses. In many instances children are required to stay home for at least 48 hours after the onset of Covid-19 symptoms such as a cough or temperature. This has led to increased pressure on parents to balance work and caring responsibilities. In many cases this is compounded by reduced access to familial care. Parents are no longer able to call on family members, particularly grandparents who may be in a vulnerable age category, for fear of spreading Covid-19. This situation further increases the caring responsibilities in one-parent families, where parents are already subject to double the caring burden of two-parent families. Recent data from the Central Statistics Office showed that in 2021 one-in-five (20%) of parents in one-parent families took unpaid sick leave, compared with 6.1% in two-parent families, highlighting the disproportionate burden on parents in one-parent families.<sup>6</sup>

**Ends**

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<sup>5</sup> (2021) Russell, H., Privalko, I., McGinnity, F. & Enright, S. *Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

<sup>6</sup> Central Statistics Office, (2022). *Personal and Work-Life Balance 2021*.