

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ, COMHIONANNAS, MÍCHUMAS, LÁN- PHÁIRTÍOCHT AGUS ÓIGE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN, EQUALITY, DISABILITY, INTEGRA- TION AND YOUTH

Dé Máirt, 25 Eanáir 2022

Tuesday, 25 January 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Ivana Bacik,	Sharon Keogan,
Holly Cairns,	Erin McGreehan,
Alan Dillon,	Lynn Ruane,
Jennifer Murnane O'Connor,	Mary Seery Kearney.
John Paul Phelan,	
Mark Ward.	

Teachta / Deputy Kathleen Funchion sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Organisation of Working Time (Domestic Violence Leave) Bill 2020: Discussion

Chairman: If any members or witnesses participating remotely experience sound or technical issues, will they let us know through the chat function? Otherwise we will proceed. As this is a public meeting, the chat function on MS Teams should only be used to advise participants of any technical issues or urgent matters and not for general comments or statements. I remind members who are participating remotely to keep their devices on mute until they are invited to speak. When they are speaking, I ask that where possible, they have their camera switched on and be mindful that we are in public session.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that they must be physically present within the confines of the place where Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House, in order to participate in public meetings. I will not permit members to participate where they are not adhering to this constitutional requirement. We ask everyone participating in the committee room to exercise personal responsibility in protecting themselves against Covid-19 and I ask them to keep their masks on unless they are speaking.

This meeting is to carry out detailed scrutiny of the Organisation of Working Time (Domestic Violence Leave) Bill 2020, which is a Private Members' Bill sponsored by Deputies McDonald and O'Reilly. I welcome Deputy O'Reilly, who will brief members. This will be followed by questions and answers from members, which must conclude no later than 4 p.m. Before I invite the Deputy to speak, I want to inform her that the committee is finalising the list of stakeholders it will engage with on the Bill and the Deputy will be advised of the final list. In accordance with the suggestion of the Business Committee, the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment has been consulted with regarding the detailed scrutiny of the Bill and a link to today's meeting was also issued to its members.

I advise the Deputy of the following in relation to parliamentary privilege. The Deputy is protected by absolute privilege in respect of her presentation to the committee. This means she has an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything she says at the meeting. However, she is expected not to abuse the privilege and it is my duty as Chair to ensure this privilege is not abused. Therefore, if the Deputy's statements are potentially defamatory towards any identifiable person or entity she will be directed to discontinue her remarks and it is imperative that she complies with any such direction.

We have allocated five minutes of speaking time. I wish to remind members that their five minutes includes the response to their questions. I will pass over now to Deputy O'Reilly.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the members of the committee for facilitating this hearing. I also want to say a special word of thanks to Sinéad Ní Bhroin for all the work she has put into this legislation. Gender-based abuse and violence is not just a justice issue or a health issue; it is a housing issue, a children's issue, a worker's issue and a worker's rights issue. When a person is subjected to domestic violence, abuse or coercive control he or she is robbed of his or her dignity, confidence and sense of safety. This trauma seeps into every aspect of their lives, and that includes the victims' working lives. Those who suffer domestic abuse are our colleagues and often our friends. Some carry the physical and emotional impact of the violence with them into the workplace. They do so because they fear losing out on badly needed pay or do not want to run the risk of disruption to their careers. Many cannot face going to work, some because of physical injuries - the all-too-visible bruises, black eyes and cuts - and others because of the deep mental scarring. As a result, they lose income and fear that questions will

be raised about their reliability. Others are painfully aware of and understandably sensitive to the stigma that comes with being abused and victimised, especially when it happens at home, in the place they should feel the safest. The importance of this legislation was summed up for me in a comment a woman made to me in a social media message. I will not give her name but she told me:

I hope this gets done. When I went to the refuge I used holidays and tried to make up the time but I could not make up all the time. It was so much pressure.

Employers also lose out from the absence of employment protections for victims of domestic abuse. Absenteeism, lost productivity, administrative costs, and job churn have a real impact on organisations. There is an accepted lack of workplace awareness of domestic violence. Marrying enactment of this legislation with a national workplace awareness of a domestic violence campaign can and will make a tangible difference for victims and their employers. The perpetrator of the violence should not be allowed to take any more from the victim, nor should it be that a victim's only option is to take annual or unpaid leave. The last thing a victim of domestic violence needs is the stress of a phone call from his or her boss, a light pay cheque or even the prospect of losing his or her job. They also need privacy and confidentiality. Being pressured or coerced back into the workplace before they are ready only adds to the distress.

The Organisation of Working Time (Domestic Violence Leave) Bill 2020 seeks to offer victims of domestic violence up to ten days' paid leave annually. It is a comprehensive and thorough Bill, prepared in consultation with the domestic violence sector and providing protections for employers in line with those contained in the paternity leave legislation and it was drafted by the Office of Parliamentary Legal Affairs. If we are to end the epidemic of domestic abuse in this State, we need a whole-of-society response that both supports and protects victims. This legislation is an important strand of this. The legislation provides that workers do not have to prove their abuse or give an employer documentary evidence for the leave needed as to do so will act as a barrier to victims seeking the support they need. This is an important provision.

There is also an economic cost to domestic violence and the sums involved are eye-watering. Research published by Safe Ireland and National University of Ireland, Galway, NUIIG, last year estimated that the national cost is €56 billion over a 20-year period. That is close to the entire tax take of the State in 2018. The research also highlights the complex relationship between poverty, social exclusion and domestic violence. Employment should be an avenue out of abuse. New Zealand, Australia and provinces in Canada have already introduced forms of paid leave. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, and others have called on the Government to ratify the International Labour Organization, ILO, Convention No. 190 on violence and harassment in the world of work. Article 18 of the accompanying recommendation identifies the provision of paid leave for the victims of domestic violence, flexible work arrangements and awareness-raising about the effects of domestic violence as appropriate measures to mitigate the impacts of it in the workplace. The Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment confirmed last month that the Government is committed to working towards being among the first ILO member states to ratify Convention No. 190. This will require employment protections as set out in this Bill.

I wish to acknowledge the existing cross-party support for the provision of a statutory entitlement to domestic violence paid leave. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth stated last month that the introduction of this leave is a personal priority for him. In 2018 Fianna Fáil committed to introduce a statutory entitlement to ten days' domestic

violence paid leave. The Labour party, the Social Democrats, Solidarity - People Before Profit and Independents all expressed their support for the legislation during the Second Stage debate, which was a positive example of the Dáil working together in common cause.

It is important for the committee to note that in both the public and private sector, some organisations and companies have already introduced this leave or are considering the introduction of this leave. Last year NUIG launched its policy and this has also been in place in Vodafone and Danske Bank. The need for paid leave from work for a range of reasons, including caring and parenting, is well established, and this piece of leave needs to be added to that. This legislation is an important addition to existing workplace rights. It is a workers' rights issue. It is an issue that affects people at work and it is almost impossible to deal with this issue in the absence of this legislation.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy O'Reilly for coming before the committee this afternoon to discuss her work on this really important topic. I want to acknowledge the merits of the Bill as a response to victims and survivors who need to take time off work. I have two questions for the Deputy on her consultation and engagement with stakeholders and support groups. I ask her to take us through what was involved in that process. Who did the Deputy meet and who did she engage with? Did she engage with any employer representative groups? If so, what was their feedback? What is the provision of up to ten days paid leave based on? Is it international best practice or is it based on other jurisdictions that have introduced similar legislation?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank Deputy Dillon for his questions. We had a series of round table engagements. I will briefly outline the history of this legislation. It was introduced in the previous Dáil but it fell when that Dáil was wound up. Up to that point, we had engaged with people who were providing services within the community. I refer here to people running the refuges as well as representatives of Women's Aid, Safe Ireland and other organisations. We also engaged with victims and survivors. Some of that happened organically because once we started talking about this issue, people came to us and that gave us a very real perspective on the issue. That work was done.

Feedback from employers and through employer forums has been very positive. Vodafone and Danske Bank are leading the way on this. They have already done it because they recognise a number of important points. First, in an ideal world, nobody would need this legislation but they have found that in terms of attracting employees, having this leave as part of a suite of measures that make people feel safe at work is very positive. We also know that Safe Ireland and the National University of Ireland in Galway, NUIG, have conducted research into the cost and there is a cost to employers in not providing this leave.

The reason for the ten days is very simple. That is what has been done in other jurisdictions. If one looks at NUIG, it chose ten days which it judged to be both proportionate and fair. It considered it fair to victims and survivors and proportionate in the context of employers.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I welcome Deputy O'Reilly to this meeting to discuss this important Bill. I very much welcome this legislation and do not have any questions on it. I support the Bill and would urge others to do likewise. I have been working with local organisations and Safe Ireland in support of this type of legislation. It is not a question of whether or if but rather when and how fast we will implement it. I congratulate the Deputy on her work and will give way to my colleagues now. My support for this legislation is 100% because it will help women and men who are suffering domestic violence and who are unsafe in their own homes. We must take every available opportunity to make their world safer and better for their

families and themselves.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: First, I commend Deputy O'Reilly and her colleagues on bringing forward this important Bill. I am delighted to express the support of the Labour Party for it. We are delighted to support this Bill which is a very important measure in the context of worker's rights and women's rights. We all know just how gendered the issue of violence in the home and in domestic settings is and indeed, we have been reminded, all too painfully, of that recently with the focus on violence against women in the context of the horrific killing of Ashling Murphy. We are delighted to support this legislation.

I have taken on the role of chairing the Oireachtas Special Committee on Gender Equality which will be looking at other measures to support women in the workplace. The Labour Party has brought forward a reproductive health-related leave Bill which also builds on the Organisation of Working Time Act structures, as does this Bill. I appreciate that is why Deputy O'Reilly has used that structure and I take her point about the ten days leave.

I have two questions for Deputy O'Reilly. She referred to similar leave provisions having been introduced in New Zealand, in some Canadian provinces and in Australia. Which is the best model? Has she looked at which is the best of the jurisdictions? New Zealand is the one we have tended to focus on but is it ten days in all of those other jurisdictions? Second, given that this committee is currently considering which stakeholders to engage with on this and that Deputy O'Reilly has already done consultation herself, who would be most useful for us to engage directly with in the context of pre-legislative scrutiny?

Again, I wish to express my strong support for this really important women's rights and worker's rights measure.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank Deputy Bacik for her support. My understanding is that the model in New Zealand is ten days and that is seen as the optimum because it gives enough time for victims and survivors, should they need it, and enough comfort to employers that it will not be excessive. It also means that it is possible to do a certain amount of planning.

On the question of stakeholders, I would see this as being very clearly a worker's rights issue and an employment related issue. The Chairman of this committee has some experience in this area and she knows from representing workers that abuse can follow them into the workplace. Very often, people are left without any skills to cope with that. They do not have the language and do not know what they can offer a person who is a victim. There may be someone working in an organisation and the shop steward knows or can sense that there is an issue. However, the shop steward does not know what it is that he or she can practically offer to that person. In that context, I would encourage this committee to hear from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, and specifically its women's committee. That is not to say that this is only a women's issue but it is an issue that predominantly impacts women. It would be remiss of me to give the impression that this legislation is only for women because it is not. It is for all victims and survivors but the sad and awful fact, as we all know because we live in the real world, is that women will be the majority beneficiaries. I would definitely encourage the committee to talk to ICTU. I would also encourage the committee to talk to NUIG and Vodafone, which have done this already. They have stepped ahead and as has been said previously, sometimes politicians are only running along behind the people. Often the people are ahead of us and we must make that effort to catch up. People have already arrived at a position where they are asking, "When?". They have established that it is necessary, they understand that it needs to happen and they want to know when it will be done.

I specifically put the provision into the Organisation of Working Time Act because I want domestic violence leave to go in the leave folder. Anyone who is familiar with human resources offices will know that there is a leave folder in the HR cabinet where organisations keep leave forms and information about the various forms of leave. I would like this leave to be there, to be mainstreamed. Perhaps mainstreamed is the wrong word but I am sure Deputy Bacik knows what I mean. I would like it to be another form of leave, rather than separate or special or one that requires going to a different room to apply. I want it to be part of the normal leave structure which is why I tried to house it in the Organisation of Working Time Act.

Deputy Mark Ward: I commend Deputies O'Reilly and McDonald on getting this legislation on domestic violence leave to this point. I also want to acknowledge the work of Ms Sinéad Ní Bhroin, who has been very helpful to me since I have been elected on matters related to this issue. I know how difficult and rare it is for Opposition Deputies to get legislation this far but we are where we are.

At least once a week a woman gets in touch with me, as a public representative, in relation to domestic violence. The lockdown last year highlighted the difficult situations women were in simply because men were at home. That was the simple reason for it.

On that note, I thank Saoirse women's refuge for taking calls from me and affected women. I thank it for its response and the opportunity it gives women to breathe and allow themselves a break. I thank the refuge for that.

In her opening statement, Deputy Louise O'Reilly mentioned that the National University of Ireland Galway launched its own policy last year. Could she elaborate on that a little?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and I were present at the virtual launch of the policy, which is being spearheaded by Dr. Nata Duvvury in the gender studies department of the university. Those involved in its creation noted it was something that was already happening in the private sector. They asked themselves whether they could introduce such a policy. They had been working with Safe Ireland to analyse the impact on the employer and the €56 billion cost. They took elements of this legislation and incorporated it into their policy. I had several meetings with Dr. Duvvury and the human resources department of the university. I have talked to the people who will be using the policy. It was incorporated into existing policies. They did it as we are proposing to do it, that is, as part of normal leave. They also undertook awareness training and a publicity campaign across the college, which they felt was positive. They only did this last May so we are not yet in a position to look back in enough detail to be able to say how it has worked and not worked thus far. However, my understanding from speaking to them is that it has worked very well and has been a positive experience for them. Certainly at the launch, they were very positive about it. They had used the provisions of this legislation and incorporated it into their own leave. That was how they did it.

Deputy Mark Ward: There were reports on the news last night - I am sure the Deputy saw them - about the 10% surge in domestic violence cases. There are still nine counties without refuges. We also heard that the Garda responded to more than 48,000 calls of instances of domestic abuse and there were over 4,000 criminal charges. This is an everyday occurrence and one can see how bad it is at the moment.

The Deputy touched there on the Organisation of Working Time Act. Will she elaborate on that a small bit? I know she spoke about it a moment ago but I would ask her to speak about it

a little more.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: My experience in my previous life included being a workplace representative. That is the perspective from which we came to this issue. This legislation is an amendment to the Organisation of Working Time Act. Deputy Bacik has similar legislation. This legislation is intended to be there as an addition to leave that exists already. One of the things that does is to bring the conversation from the margins into the centre, which is important because it is a workplace issue. This issue nearly always affects women. If a woman is experiencing domestic abuse, she might come into work and be met with a question from a colleague about what she did at the weekend which she does not want to answer because the weekend was hell and she does not want to refer to it. The colleague asks her again the next week, the week after and the week after that. Eventually, the colleague stops asking because the woman does not respond but everyone in the office or workplace knows there is an issue. We are seeking to put this leave in with other forms of leave. There is no shame in taking parental leave and there should be no shame in taking this leave.

Our intention was to house this leave along with other forms of leave that are taken as a matter of course in the normal working year. The hope is that we would give people the language to not be afraid to talk about it. I have experience of this as a politician, as has Deputy Ward, and I had experience in my previous life. People want to help but they do not know how to do so. This is a practical way to help and it is not separate, different or over there in another corner. It is a part of the leave arrangement. It allows us to tell people they have an entitlement to this leave. This is not a grace and favour arrangement. I am not offering to go to the boss and tell him or her that X is having a bit of trouble at home. This is people's entitlement and it is in the leave folder along with all the other forms of leave. That will avoid any addition to the stigma, shame and marginalisation that someone might be feeling in any event.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I echo everything that others have said about how important and needed the legislation is. It is brilliant. I have one or two queries. I want to avoid being too particular or specific. If a woman ends up having to go to a refuge a fair way away from her workplace, is there scope within the Bill to cater for extenuating circumstances and allow that woman to apply for additional leave? Is the amount of leave to be set at ten days, after which a woman cannot apply to extend it even if she was put into a refuge an hour away from her workplace and could not drive or whatever the circumstances might be that would make it impossible?

My other questions relate to the scope of the Bill. If an employee discloses an instance of domestic abuse, will there be a training or information campaign targeted at employers so they know how to manage the situation and understand what is expected of them and what is not expected of them? In some cases, that might mean ensuring an employer does not overreach and make a situation worse because somebody has disclosed a certain situation. Is there scope within the Bill to provide support to employers or some sort of information campaign directed at employers so they know how to manage these situations? I understand what the Deputy has said about the leave being seen in the same way as any other leave but it is hard to know what way an employer will respond to a person saying he or she is taking domestic violence leave. We must ensure that employers understand what is and is not expected of them in that situation.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Senator. On the question about flexibility, I will say that the ten days can be broken up. If a woman's refuge is far away from her workplace, she would have the opportunity to take that leave parcelled up. I would be open to having a discussion at the next stage about how we could extend it in certain specific circumstances. That is a

worthwhile conversation.

The Senator asked what is to be done around an information campaign. Part of ILO Convention No. 190, which I referred to earlier, is on tackling domestic abuse in the workplace. Part of it states there must be an information campaign. The Minister of State, Deputy English, has said it is his intention to ratify that convention. I assume and understand that work is ongoing. If that is ratified, the information campaign comes with it. However, when there is any form of new leave introduced, the people in human resources departments must get training on how it works. No matter what kind of leave it is, once new leave is introduced, human resources must get trained on it. That would be a good time to bring in the information campaign. We could do simple things such as posters in the workplace and information leaflets in the canteen. All of that is extremely important.

Having the leave in place means that an employee is not asking for a grace and favour arrangement. The employee is entitled to the leave and the only question is when he or she takes it. That must be key because it is scary. It is also scary for people who are in work and see someone in this situation, desperately want to help but cannot think what practical things can be done. The practical thing that can be done is to show the people concerned the posters in the break rooms and tell them what they are entitled to. Thereafter an affected person can go to the human resources department and the discretion is there. As happens with any new form of leave, there must be training for how the leave is applied for and how the applications are handled. Training in how the confidentiality aspect is handled must be key.

The Senator is right that people might make a situation worse while trying to make it better. I see some Deputies nodding because we have all been in situations where we wanted to help but did not know what we could practically do. This is not the beginning, middle and end of the solution but it is an important piece of the jigsaw to ensure people have a practical means to help anyone affected by domestic violence. The training that goes along with it will have to be specialised. It is not a matter of telling someone to log on to a portal and that is how the matter is dealt with. The training will have to accompany the new leave. With the ratification of the ILO convention, training will necessarily follow. However, we do not have to wait. The discussions we are having today and the discussions the committee will have at a later date will inform public discourse, which means that the more people are talking about the issue, the less it is in the shadows. The more we shine a light on it the better chance we have of nobody ever having to use this leave.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I want to join in the call to provide statutory entitlement to domestic violence paid leave. It is a practical intervention that responds to the needs of victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Safe Ireland has rightly called domestic violence an ongoing epidemic and only last week we learned that the Garda responded to almost 50,000 incidents of domestic abuse last year, an increase of 10%. Support providers, even down to local rural ones like West Cork Women Against Domestic Violence, have seen significant rises in the number of calls they are receiving. Cultural and social changes are essential but we need to bring every measure, resource and focus the State can muster to respond to the epidemic. For too long domestic violence has been treated as a private matter which does not impact on work life and we know that is not true. Domestic abuse and violence result in unimaginable physical and psychological impacts which affect all aspects of people's lives. Financial abuse is a real but under-reported feature of domestic abuse. The National Women's Council of Ireland highlighted that 94% of survivors experience financial abuse and that employment sabotage is experienced by 78% of survivors. Deputy O'Reilly's Bill recognises those issues and the realities faced by women and

children in trying to escape violent and coercive situations.

I have a few questions so if there is time I would like to come back in with more. Could the Deputy outline why the Bill is related to the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997? It seems the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth described this as not being the best vehicle for such a scheme during the Second Stage debate, which the Deputy disagreed with. Could the Deputy elaborate on that?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: My experience tells me that the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 is the place for it. There is no fundamental disagreement between the Minister and me and we all agree that the legislation should be drafted and brought in. If the Minister was here I would tell him that I have a Bill that is ready to go, that has been drafted by the parliamentary legal advisers, that has been scrutinised by people in the sector and that I believe will work. It does not go any further than the proposals I understand are coming from Government. The difference is one of time.

The reason I housed it within the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 is that this is a workers' rights issue and an issue of leave. The intention is that the leave would be mainstreamed with other forms of leave and would not be separate, in the margins or in the shadows. Rather it is intended that it would be a form of leave that one has an entitlement to. When I think about it I go back to when I was a shop steward and in this situation with somebody in work. I think about what I could do beyond giving them a cup of tea, a hug and a listening ear. This leave can be provided. It is not special leave; it is leave that workers have an entitlement to in the same way as bereavement or parental leave. Some of us may never use that leave. In an ideal world we would all be sitting here thinking that is a nice idea but that we do not need this. However, that is now where we are and this is necessary.

My thinking and the thinking of the party on this is that the best vehicle for it is to put it with existing forms of leave. All of those come from the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 and it is about how one organises one's time in work so that it is put as a workers' rights issue. That is not to say it does not have other elements. It is a housing, health and justice issue and a whole range of Departments are covered but, for me, from the people I have spoken to and from my experience, the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 is where one would go for other forms of leave. I keep using the phrase "mainstreaming" and I do not mean to because this should not be mainstreamed but the Deputy understands what I mean when I say it is not a separate form of leave that is special over there. It is here in the folder or book for leave and workers can avail of it because they have an entitlement to it, not because there is a special case being made. That is the key to it. From talking to people in the trade union movement, worker representatives and people from human resource departments, their view is that this is the best way to do it simply because it means it is in the same place as other leave.

Deputy Holly Cairns: For all of us to understand the impact and for anyone watching, could the Deputy outline the impact of similar legislation in jurisdictions like New Zealand and Canada where it is already in place? It has had a profound impact on people once it has been introduced.

In practice, how can we envisage the Bill working? To an extent it depends on the degree of trust between employers and employees. I hope we would all envisage that employers would give leave and any allowances they can to employees in those circumstances but the Bill allows for employers to refuse an application for leave if they have reasonable grounds for believing an employee is not entitled to the necessary violence leave concerned. That is probably a nec-

essary provision as well. How can we ensure that an already vulnerable person is not denied leave that he or she is entitled to by an employer acting in bad faith? That might be an unusual scenario but I wonder how it will play out if this leave can be refused.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I was privileged to speak at a conference where I heard from stakeholders from New Zealand. They said that the practical impact is in place and being able to take time off is in place. In surveys there, people reported back that they felt like their employers understood and that they did not have to go and bare their souls after having suffered a trauma. They felt they had that right and that it was given to them as one adult to another. It was not questioned in the way some might have envisaged it. As well as that, they pointed to the extent to which a national conversation started.

It is not just the legislation, which is important and we agree that it is necessary but it is not just that. It is the posters that tell people there is a new form of leave. When changes are made to the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 or to other forms of leave a publicity campaign generally goes with that to tell people that their rights in work have changed. That sparks a conversation at the level of the workplace which could not even be quantified other than to say it has value beyond measure. That means people are talking so that instead of the victim and survivor being somebody in the workplace who is marginalised, she – it is not only a female but it very often is – is then brought into that conversation because people are talking about the new form of leave. Awareness goes up and along with awareness of the leave the awareness of domestic abuse goes up. They found that was the value.

In practice there is a lot of trust involved in this and there has to be because we are dealing with people who have suffered trauma. When it is questioned whether somebody might take advantage of this leave when he or she did not need it, I would usually respond by asking someone if he or she would take leave he or she was not entitled to. I would not and I will answer for Deputy Cairns because I know she would not either. Deputy Murnane O'Connor or Senator McGreehan would not do so either, nor would the Chair. Who are these people who will take advantage? This is a specific form of leave and an awareness campaign will nearly police itself. We cannot retraumatise people by making them tell a story that is personal and that is the cause of trauma in their lives. I 100% accept that there is an element of trust involved but I have that cheeky response when people ask, which is always to put the question I referred to earlier. I will not say exactly what I would say but the Deputy can imagine the language I would use. I would ask people if they would take advantage of this leave if they did not need it. The universal answer from my experience is always "No." I know every member of the committee and in this room agree with me so who are these people? I do not believe that leave of this nature would be abused. However, I am not naïve enough to believe it could not be abused so there is a mechanism in place, in the way there is for a person who might try to take parental leave when he or she does not have an entitlement to it. There is a mechanism there for an employer to go to a third party. There is also a mechanism there for a worker to go to a third party should he or she need it. We know from the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, following the Zalewski judgment, that all of these hearings have to take place in public. That is the default. I would say that there is a compelling case for these hearings to take place not only in private, but quickly. Again, that involves resourcing the WRC, although I know that I am straying into another area here. However, there is sufficient reason within the legislation for employers to be relaxed. We only have to look at Danske Bank, Vodafone and other employers in other jurisdictions that are moving ahead with this anyway, as well as in a positive way. They are giving positive feedback. As well as that, we know that the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council, NCPC, has said repeatedly that there will be issues around attracting talent to a workplace. Having a

decent set of terms and conditions for the people one is hoping to attract is a good place to start. Many employers are now waking up to this fact.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Just to clarify, my question was more about if people were wrongly refused leave, rather than trying to get the leave without needing it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I apologise, I took it as a general question about whether there could be abuse of this. If people are wrongly refused it, there is a compelling case to be made for these hearings to all be held in private, both for the privacy and the dignity of the person who is requesting it. Apologies, I took the Deputy's question to mean on both sides. I understand that now.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank Deputy O'Reilly. Like other speakers, I am fully supportive of this proposed legislation. As the Deputy has said, timing here is crucial. It is important that we are here today as all political parties that are fully supportive of ten days domestic violence paid leave. Deputy O'Reilly has said that she has had good responses from Ministers, which is crucial. We also have to look at timing.

The Deputy said that there is an accepted lack of workplace awareness around domestic violence. I think she is right. When she speaks about leaflets and getting the awareness campaign out there, will funding be needed for that? If so, we need to make sure that we get it. Has the Deputy looked at this?

In 2021, the Amber Women's Refuge conducted a research piece on the impact of domestic abuse on the workplace. Some 200 women and men who worked outside the home in Carlow and Kilkenny were surveyed. I have the findings and I will send them to Deputy O'Reilly. I wonder if she has contacted many refuges; I am sure she has done so locally. That is welcome, too. However, when we get this through, it will be important that we have a national campaign, particularly covering areas such as refuges, where they need more support. We see that with children as well. Supports for children are needed because they can be so much affected.

It is important that we get this into all workplaces. Does the Deputy see any obstacles in her way? She has mentioned a number of companies and that is welcome. We need to make sure that every woman who is in a domestic violence situation can access this, so that those ten days paid leave are given to her. Does Deputy O'Reilly see barriers? Does she see some companies taking it up and some not? We have to try to make sure that everyone takes it up.

I want to say "well done" and that I fully support this.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank Deputy Murnane O'Connor. She mentioned the Amber Women's Refuge. The Chair of this committee has me fully across all of the work it does. She has been in touch on a number of occasions to sponsor her and I fully expect that that will happen again. The Amber Women's Refuge has great support from all of the local Deputies and Senators in the area, just as Aoibhneas has in my own area. We have engaged with the refuges, because that is where this information needs to get to.

Deputy Murnane O'Connor touched on interesting point. As a general rule, when there is a new form of leave, there will be an information campaign. That will usually involve the relevant Department producing the leaflets, the posters, the information and making sure that that gets to the level of the workplace. The Deputy raises a very good point, which is that we should be looking beyond that, by getting the information to the level of the refuge as part of the information campaign. I am sure that we have all engaged with the people who are running

the refuges. You will always see an information table or an information stand that has leaflets in the refuges. We will need to get the information there. That is important and that is a useful suggestion. As part as any information campaign, when there is a change, there will generally be national advertisements, as well as local. They will not just happen at the level of the workplace. One will generally have national advertisements.

The biggest barrier that will be faced, which I fully accept, is that employers might be nervous about taking this on. They may wonder how they will afford it. That has to be part of the awareness campaign. It is not just a case of “How can we afford it?” It is a case of looking at, as Deputy Murnane O’Connor says, the work done by Amber and the other organisations on what the actual costs are. It will be about looking at how much it costs, as well as how much it will cost to implement it.

Although we talk about domestic abuse and gender-based violence as an epidemic or endemic, we also need to remember that these are small numbers at the level of a workplace. This means, therefore, that we will not see mass disruption within each workplace. However, we need to listen to employers if they are nervous. We need to be able to go to where they are at and have that conversation with them. We need to do this in the context of the actual costs at the level of the workplace to the employer, as well as the cost to the people who are working alongside the victims and survivors when there are unexplained absences.

If someone finds themselves in this situation and has exhausted annual leave entitlement, they may be required to attend court, go to a doctor’s appointment, attend an appointment with their solicitor or whatever. If they have exhausted their leave and do not have any other option, they will find themselves having to ring in at the last minute. That is very disruptive, whereas with this leave and with the provision of this leave, absences can - not always because of the nature of the leave and how it may have to be taken at short notice - be planned. This means that an employer can plan. It means that they will be able to mitigate against any potential impacts. However, I fully respect the fact that there may be nervousness and anxiousness on the part of employers. The committee will hear not just from workers, but employer representatives and they can speak of their fears, as well as talk about the positive way that they want to approach this. I have not encountered any negativity coming from employer representatives on this.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: Deputy Murnane O’Connor has touched on a few of my points. I agree with Deputy O’Reilly on the issue of trust. We have all dealt with people who are in domestically violent situations. I have never come across a case where there was not some form of abuse taking place. It does self-police to a certain extent.

I completely agree with the proposal. This would be a hugely positive step for Ireland to take and it would be timely. The issue is cost. I was trying to get the Deputy’s documents up on my device and I could not get them. Does the Deputy have any rough idea of what we are potentially talking about? I am talking about the practical politics, which is a bit grubby, in a sense. However, we all know the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform operates. We know how businesses operate. There could be possible trade-offs between them in how the costs would be carried. I presume that this would apply to public sector companies as well as private sector companies.

The other issue that I have found in my 20-something years as a public representative is that sometimes domestic violence is not just one spouse against another. It can be other people who are living in the household. I presume that they will be covered by what we are talking about here as well?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Yes.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: That is all I have to ask.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank Deputy Phelan. They are covered. I did have a quick look. I have the note, although I do not have it with me. I apologise and I will send it to the Deputy straight afterwards. What we do know is that over 20 years, there is a cost of €56 billion to time lost. I apologise for not having the figure with me. I thought I had it with me and I will supply it. I would say to employers that there is a huge value in having the capacity to plan and for this leave being taken in a planned way. There is also a huge value in the retention of experiential learning. What you learn on the job, and this could be any job from a barista to a CEO, you have with you and some of it cannot easily be passed on to someone else. When an employer loses a valued member of the team, the employer does not just lose the physical presence, the hands, the eyes and the physical activity: the experiential learning is lost also. This can be quite detrimental to a company. In an ideal world this leave would not be needed at all or it may only be needed or availed of once, but it must be considered in the context of being able to maintain someone over the course of their career, the impact of such leave over the course of that person's career in keeping them in the workplace, and ensuring that the employer does not suffer that loss of experiential learning. I fully appreciate that this is not an exact answer to the question, but I will get it.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, quite rightly keeps a close eye on the finances, and I would expect that it does, but several State agencies and organisations are already moving ahead in this regard. NUIG has already implemented this policy. I launched it last year with Deputy Phelan's colleague, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris. NUIG has already moved on this and it is my understanding that all of the universities, or the vast majority of them, have indicated that they will bring this in during 2022. There is a positivity there and it is great to see the public sector leading the way. We then need to see not just the bigger organisations but also smaller ones coming to the fore and having their questions answered. There will be questions and I do not for a moment imagine that this will be plain sailing. It is another form of leave and I do not believe it is at all grubby to mention the concern for employers around the bottom line but it must be looked at in the round. One must look at the opportunity costs and the costs that are lost.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: The Deputy mentioned training.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Yes, it can be about simple things like training somebody to replace that person. When people have worked in a place for ten years, they can be on autopilot. They know exactly where everything is and the new person takes twice as long to do everything. It does not mean that they will not learn, it just means that it takes a while. So there is all of that as well. Certainly, having talked with people in industry, there is a real competition for talent. A company having this kind of compassionate policy within its suite of HR options says something about the company as an employer. It also says something about us as a State if we can do that. This is why I am very hopeful. I am heartened by the response and I am very hopeful that we can get this through.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: The Deputy mentioned earlier on, in reply to Deputy Murnane O'Connor or to Deputy Cairns, a mechanism for referral to a third party. Will she outline a little bit more on that please?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It would be done in the same way as parental leave. If there

is a refusal to grant it in what would seem to be reasonable circumstances, the worker takes the case. If, before the leave is taken and the employer suspects that the leave is not required and there is no objective reason for it, then the employer can make the referral to a third party for that examination. My point was that all of these hearings now must happen in public as a default. There is an option, however, for a hearing in private. The Zalewski judgment had not been issued at the time we drafted this Bill but now that it has, when we are having discussions at the next Stage - and fingers crossed we will get there - we would look at making sure it complies with the Workplace Relations Commission and the Zalewski ruling, and that there is a tendency towards anonymity on this case. I do not believe that anyone would want to put people into the situation where they would have to be public about it.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: The Deputy would look at how they handled the matter.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Exactly. I believe that would be very important, given that it is not just a spousal thing and it is for people within the family. It is important that we would have that. I would have to talk to the Minister of State, Deputy English, about how we could do that. That would be an important thing to do also.

Chairman: That completes the questions. I thank Deputy O'Reilly for her time and for answering everything. I must get agreement from the members to publish the opening statements to the Oireachtas website. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Sitting suspended at 3.54 p.m. and resumed at 4 p.m.

Child Poverty: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: In our second session, we resume our discussion on child poverty, which we commenced prior to Christmas. I welcome Ms Karen Kiernan, chief executive officer, and Ms Niamh Kelly, policy manager, One Family; Dr. Tricia Keilthy, head of social justice and policy, and Ms Rose McGowan, national president, Society of St. Vincent de Paul; and Ms Karin Jonsson, manager, Quarryvale Family Resource Centre, Clondalkin.

I will invite the witnesses to make their opening statements in the following order, Ms Kiernan, Dr. Keilthy and Ms Jonsson. Before doing so, I must advise the witnesses of the following in relation to parliamentary privilege. As all the witnesses are appearing before the committee virtually, I need to point out there is uncertainty if parliamentary privilege will apply to their evidence from a location outside of the parliamentary precincts of Leinster House. Therefore, if they are directed by me to cease giving evidence on a particular matter, it is imperative that they comply with any such direction. The witnesses will have three minutes to make their opening statements, which I ask them to adhere to owing to time constraints. There will be questions and answers with members afterwards. Each member will have five minutes' speaking time, to include questions and answers.

I invite Ms Kiernan to make her opening statement.

Ms Karen Kiernan: I thank the Chairman and the committee for inviting One Family to this meeting. Prior to Christmas, I appeared before the committee wearing another hat. It is great to have the opportunity to address the committee as a representative of One Family.

We know that one-parent families are consistently over-represented in all measurements

indicating poor outcomes and poorer well-being, such as poverty, deprivation, employment, homelessness, fuel poverty and poor living standards, all of which are particularly prescient at the moment. In recent years, there have been multiple independent and Government-commissioned research reports on one-parent families, all of which indicate the poorer outcomes that are experienced and that need to be addressed. These reports include recommendations from the Joint Committee on Social Protection in 2017, which is referenced in the current programme for Government commitments. The most recent data from EU survey on income and living conditions, EU-SILC, published last month, shows children in one-parent families are six times more likely to live in poverty than children in two parent families. We find this to be a shocking indictment on the policies that were supposed to be affecting and supporting one-parent families over the last decade.

The research mentioned not only shows the problems, it also offers a range of policy responses and solutions which, if implemented, could reduce child poverty in one-parent families. I chair the child poverty sub-committee of the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures National Advisory Group on Children and Young People. Dr. Keilthy is also a member of that sub-committee. We support and reiterate the recommendations of the comprehensive report provided to the Minister last year by this group. We believe there should be a new national action plan on child poverty, with a specific target to reduce child poverty, as well as measures to improve outcomes for parents and children in one-parent families. Based on that, we have four main recommendations. The first is around income inadequacy, which is a core driver of poverty in one-parent families. The focus of Government's response should be on social welfare income and the deep and persistent problems caused by the absence of a child-centred statutory child maintenance system. One Family recommends this be addressed by the establishment of such a service and also by benchmarking social welfare rates against the cost of a minimum essential standard of living.

The second recommendation is in regard to childcare. Parents in one-parent families have an additional burden when it comes to childcare responsibilities, but this is often overlooked by the State. For example, parents are required to move from one-parent family payment to jobseeker's transitional payment when their youngest child turns seven years old and again from jobseeker's transitional payment to jobseeker's allowance when that child turns 14. These are arbitrary measures. They do not relate to the developmental or care needs of the child or the circumstances of the family. In line with the EU child guarantee framework, we recommend free access to quality, accessible early years and school-age childcare for all one-parent families as part of a wider move to publicly-funded childcare.

The third recommendation is in regard to the creation of pathways to education and work. There are a number of barriers to education and quality employment that are, unfortunately, unique to one-parent families. These include an emphasis on activation rather than the education needs of lone parents, restrictions on accessing education support schemes based on housing supports and means-testing of grants. We recommend: tailoring employment and training supports; improving in-work income supports to make work pay, which is vital; supporting lone parents to take up and increase their working hours; and the introduction of a living wage. We strongly recommend that an education first approach should be taken to activating lone parents and eligibility for grants, specialist bridging programmes and other educational supports should be expanded.

The fourth recommendation relates to housing. We know that one-parent families are much more likely to experience homelessness, housing insecurity and poor quality housing than the

rest of the population. People who are separated or divorced often face specific challenges relating to existing or prior ownership of the family home. One Family recommends a housing-first approach to increasing the output of built and acquired local authority and approved housing body social housing units to try to address the housing needs of one-parent families. We also need to make sure that both parents can access appropriate family homeless accommodation should they need it and improve access to support schemes for people who are separated or divorced.

I thank the committee members for their attention.

Chairman: I thank Ms Kiernan. I invite Dr. Keilthy to make her opening statement.

Dr. Tricia Keilthy: I thank the Chairman and the committee for the invitation to speak today on the important topic of child poverty, a core issue of concern for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, SVP.

In 2021, our regional offices received just over 191,000 requests for help, almost 70% of which were requests from families with children. As pointed out by Ms Kiernan, with poverty rates six times greater than other family types, one-parent families continue to be the group most often helped by SVP. The high cost of living, lack of opportunity, precarious and low-paid work and underfunded public services limit the options for families in poverty and make it difficult for them to see a way out. Growing up in poverty means children are missing out on childhood and are being deprived of reaching their full potential. As well as the individual consequences of living in poverty, the failure to address poverty also brings significant societal costs. In recent research published by SVP and carried out by Dr. Michéal Collins of UCD, it is estimated that the State spends €4.5 billion per annum dealing with the consequences of poverty on people's lives. To put that in context, this is greater than the respective budgets of housing, justice, transport and agriculture.

We can solve child poverty, but we need all Departments to work together to address the structural issues that trap families in poverty. We echo calls for a new ambitious and comprehensive child poverty plan, with concrete actions across all Departments. Committing to benchmark social welfare to an adequate level would ensure children have their basic needs met and are not excluded from everyday childhood experiences. An adequate income would allow families to plan for the future and provide an anchor for parents to access training, education and good-quality jobs. A living wage and free childcare for low-income families would support parents to build a better life for their children.

With housing costs increasingly driving financial insecurity among low-income households, we need Housing for All to deliver on the promise to build more social and affordable housing so that every child can grow up in a secure and safe home. At the same time, families experiencing homelessness or living in insecure privately rented accommodation and worried about how they will keep a roof over their heads need timely and effective support. We need a child and family homelessness strategy with a strong emphasis on prevention. A full review of the operation of the housing assistance payment and the impact of unaffordable top-ups to meet market rents is also urgently required.

We are currently seeing the impact of rising energy costs, which are putting significant pressure on struggling households. This winter, SVP has seen a 24% increase in calls for help with utilities. As well as immediate support for families struggling to keep their homes warm, we need a just transition for children that ensures all can live in warm energy efficient

homes regardless of tenure type, surrounded by safe green space to play and connected to their schools, friends and community through an affordable public transport system. Providing genuinely free primary and secondary education would mean the full participation in education for all children. At the moment, our underfunded education system is preventing too many children from reaching their potential and is placing families under significant financial pressure at back-to-school time. We also need targeted supports to help address educational disadvantage, which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Getting the policies right and putting resources behind them are critical but ending child poverty must be a top-line priority across government. We can look to New Zealand, which has shown leadership in this regard. It has made targets legally binding, established a child poverty unit in the Prime Minister's office to drive implementation from the top and amended its public finance Bill to ensure all budgetary decisions reduce poverty and promote well-being. This is the type of radical action we need if we are to make an end to child poverty a reality in Ireland.

Ms Karin Jonsson: I thank the committee for inviting me to this meeting. I will address the issue of child poverty from the perspective of food poverty.

Clondalkin Cares food bank aims to provide essential food to those who need it now, to support people to address the issues which lead to food poverty and to end food poverty. In the past two years, we have engaged with over 3,000 people, half of whom were aged under 18. We currently support about 500 people on a regular basis.

Food poverty is defined as “the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability and accessibility”. It is estimated that in 2018, 8% of the population experienced food poverty. With the Covid-19 pandemic, food poverty grew and some estimate it has more than doubled. Some 71% of those accessing our food bank say the pandemic is one reason they need us.

When people contact us we start by assuring them they will get food. It is not easy to ask for food. People feel shame and expect to be judged for not being able to provide for their family. They are scared and under an incredible amount of stress, so we reassure and listen. We also gather information. We record as many relevant statistics as possible. We need to understand what causes food poverty so we can work for change.

There will always be people who need food support for a while. This can be for a number of reasons but many of the reasons we see are systemic and not the result of an isolated incident. Half of the families state there is not enough money coming in to pay all the bills and buy enough food. Over one third of families are in debt. The “loan man”, paying off catalogues and drug debts feature. Being in arrears with rent or electricity or taking a credit union loan to cover essentials has become the norm for some people and is sometimes only mentioned as an afterthought. Some 17% have increased costs for health reasons, such as needing to keep the heat on all the time, travelling costs to appointments and more expensive food. Some have to go private for assessment of needs or speech and language therapy as the waiting lists are endless.

A total of 14% are registered homeless. It is expensive to be homeless as many do not have access to adequate cooking and storage facilities. This can also be true for people living in direct provision and we believe there is a hidden number here of people who are struggling but not coming forward. Some 12% are waiting for a social welfare payment. Quite new here is that the pandemic is leading to families not receiving children's allowance or a medical card and young adults living on their own not getting full social welfare payments for a long time.

People go hungry to make sure their children can eat. They switch on the heat for a while only when the children are at home. They choose between paying a bill or buying food. The constant stress of food poverty cannot be overestimated. It makes it near impossible to try to address other issues, like looking for a job or dealing with an addiction. What is especially sad is that many of the children whose parents or carers come to us are fully aware of their situation. They share their parents' worry, shame and stress. No child should ever have to experience this.

Chairman: I thank Ms Jonsson and all our speakers. I remind members as we go into questions and answers to, as much as possible, address their question to a specific person or, if it is for all three, to indicate that at the start.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their opening contributions on the important topic of child poverty. In this committee, we all strive to introduce targeted measures that have an impact on reducing child poverty.

I will first focus on early childhood care and education, referenced by One Family. My party, Fine Gael, has engaged extensively in this area through its policy lab and produced the Care of the Child document, which provides an enhanced route to early childhood care and education for pre-school aged children and help to prepare a child for starting primary school. I note that One Family recommends free access to quality, accessible early years and school-age childcare for one-parent households as part of a wider move to a publicly funded childcare system. I would be interested to hear more on this approach to childcare for single parents and what progress or engagement One Family has made in this area as one of its main targeted measures.

My second question relates to those in need of food supports. What Government response would the witnesses like to see implemented to combat parents' worry and, as Ms Jonsson referenced, the shame and stress of not knowing what food they may have to put on the table in the evenings? Do the school meals programme and breakfast clubs do enough for children living and dealing with food poverty and the struggle of having to go to school on an empty stomach.

Third, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul outlined an all-government approach to addressing structural issues that trap families in poverty. What would this new poverty plan contain? What actions would the witnesses like to see across Departments?

Chairman: We will start with Ms Kiernan, then Ms Jonsson and then Dr. Keilthy, because that seems to be the order of the questions.

Ms Karen Kiernan: I will speak briefly and hand over to my colleague, Ms Kelly. On early years, it is under recommendations from the EU that one-parent families should receive free or extremely low-cost access to childcare. We are not aware of that being in Government policy or being looked at, but it will be arising in the coming months. The chair of the national advisory council on Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, Tanya Ward, sent the full child poverty paper to the Chair. It is an 84-page document and is comprehensive in terms of what we would like to see in the poverty plan. It also addresses food poverty.

School meals were mentioned and are critical. We need to see them throughout the country and not just in a handful of schools.

Ms Niamh Kelly: Our thinking behind free access to childcare for all one-parent families is in response to the huge barrier that lack of such access presents for accessing education and quality employment for families. The national childcare scheme provides free hours for families but it is tied, in large part, to a parent's participation in education and employment. We

would like to see it follow the child so all children in one-parent families can access childcare, allowing parents to take up part-time work or education opportunities and focusing on the development of the children in these families. It is another pillar of the EU child guarantee that all one-parent families have access to free early and school-age childcare. Currently, in the case of families whose children are approaching 14 years of age and seven years of age, payments change from the one-parent family payment to the jobseeker's transitional payment and then on to the jobseeker's allowance. What we see at these stages is that the care needs of those families do not change; they still need access to care for their children. Investment in school-aged childcare, historically in Ireland, has been low, and that is an area we would like to be addressed such that it will not just be about early years care and education but also about those children who go to school, particularly at those touch points where parents move from one payment to another and are activated back into employment.

Chairman: I thank Ms Kelly. Did Ms Jonsson wish to come in on the food question?

Ms Karin Jonsson: Regarding what families need now, one of our aims, and it is also part of the committee's work, is to end food poverty by examining the reasons for it and to end the policies that enable it. Ms Kiernan spoke about this in the context of single-parent households and their needs. The majority of families with children who access our services are single-parent households. I hope that work to ensure people do not live in poverty in general will not take too long.

In the meantime, for those of us who provide food and food banks, there should be more resources out there for us and they should be more easily accessible in order that we would not have to look so much towards fundraising, not quite knowing where all the food is going to come from. We have been part of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, FEAD, programme since July last year, which is an immense support but, even at that, it provides for about 70 families what I would say is only a very small weekly shopping basket, and we give that out once a month.

School meals are essential, as we have seen during the Covid-19 pandemic. We supported many local schools in distributing the food and there was a very good uptake on that. We also saw parents' worry, concern and fear when the summer was coming because they were not sure whether the food would continue. In some schools, meals are not given to all the children and the kind of food that is given out varies. Shame comes into that. If it is only there for the poor ones, that is, those of us who cannot manage, some parents will choose not to access it even if they could do with it. These breakfast clubs and lunches should be completely open to all those who want them, not for those who qualify, such that the option will be there for every child in the school.

Covid-19 has brought many new families into poverty, that is, those who do not live in delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, areas or families who had never experienced it previously. If children could have access to breakfast and lunch every day of the school week, that would be a great help.

Chairman: I thank Ms Jonsson. Did Dr. Keilthy wish to come in on the Society of St. Vincent de Paul question?

Dr. Tricia Keilthy: I might respond to the question on the all-of-government approach before handing over to Ms McGowan, who may want to add to the points on food poverty, an issue that arises frequently in our work in communities. On the all-of-government approach,

the blueprint is there in the form of the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures child poverty paper, which outlines exactly which areas require action to address child poverty, whether in education, housing, supports for parents or early intervention.

To facilitate the whole-of-government approach, a number of steps can be taken. From our point of view, it is critical to have a driving force behind tackling child poverty, which we foresee as a child poverty unit being established, co-located between the Departments of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Social Protection, that would be tasked with developing child poverty plans, where each Department would have specific actions and targets it must deliver on. A key part of that would relate to ensuring our budgetary process was attuned to the need to reduce child poverty. That would involve ensuring all budgetary decisions have been properly poverty-proofed, meaning that, if a proposal were put forward, an assessment would be carried out to see what impact that would have on poverty, while ensuring that all decisions that are made will effectively reduce that.

It is about the collective impact of policy decisions, given that sometimes, a decision by, say, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage may improve circumstances for a household but that may be offset by a change in another policy area by another Department. For example, if social welfare payments increase, this may be negated if differential rent does not increase or if there is not a change there and the person's income is taken in rent. That is about Departments coming together, discussing the collective impact of what they are doing and asking how they can ensure the budget is addressing child poverty.

Ms McGowan might speak to the issue of food poverty.

Ms Rose McGowan: I will not reiterate what the representatives of the two other organisations said because we are all on the same page. A couple of issues, both for me personally and for the society, arise. It is difficult to come to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for help, but imagine that in 2021, people in Ireland were phoning us looking for food. It is horrendous for us in Ireland to say people are short of food. It reminds me of Famine times.

I have been in the society for a long time, since school, and I can see the different kinds of help people are now looking for. When I joined, we might have been bringing shopping to houses where people were not able to budget, and we would try to show them that, if they bought a week's shopping, it would be a better use of their money. Now, people are queuing outside food banks for food when they are short. The pandemic has definitely exacerbated circumstances. Children were at home from school, and when that is the case, as anyone who has children will know, the fridge is constantly being opened and food is being eaten.

A big issue for us relates to dignity. It is difficult for people to ask for help where they do not have enough food. People may have to get it through the FEAD programme, which is of excellent quality but do people really want to have to collect food from a food bank or to be hoping the school would know they are in need? Hundreds of people come to our food banks and we are quite happy to operate them with our volunteers. Before Covid, we delivered food in order that people would not have to queue. During the first lockdown, because we are in every community, other community organisations worked with us, such as the Garda, which was excellent, and GAA clubs. We are confidential, however, so we need to be really careful in how we deal with people. The quality of the food is excellent, but one person may not eat rice, for example, and another may not eat pasta. People are entitled to choice but we hand them bags or boxes of food where there is no choice. That, to me, is not dignified.

I fully agree all schools should be in the school meals programme, not just those in DEIS areas. In fact, because of Covid, a family might be better off living in a DEIS area because they will get the breakfast club or lunch in school. We have had more and more people come to us who have been working and, therefore, they would not be living in a DEIS area. We have had people with mortgages, car loans and energy bills. There are lots of people who have been working. As one family said, a single parent, whether a mum or a dad, must try to juggle everything. Food poverty is a very big issue. As a society, we will have to address that.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank the witnesses for taking the time to come before the committee today and share their experiences of food and child poverty. I welcome Ms Jonsson, who I know very well. She operates a food bank in the heart of my area in Quarryvale. It has been a beacon of hope to many people. Unfortunately, I have spent a lot of time with her and her organisation over the past couple of years dealing with people who needed to access the food bank in Quarryvale under the auspices of the Quarryvale Family Resource Centre.

It is a highly disadvantaged area. There are many levels of poverty in the area. It was the same when I was growing up in the 1980s. I echo what Ms Jonsson said about the school meals programme. It should be open to everybody. When I was younger, I accessed the school meals programme. Everybody seemed to be poor in the 1980s, and things do not seem to have become better in some parts of the area.

I also echo what was said by another witness about DEIS areas. The DEIS areas within my locality have some access to food, but some schools are not categorised as DEIS despite having some of the highest level of poverty in the area. I will not mention them because I do not want to stigmatise them further. The approach to the DEIS designation needs to be examined.

Can Ms Jonsson elaborate on her comment in her opening statement regarding the number of parents accessing the food bank because they have to find a private operator to provide their children's healthcare? Parents are desperate to find care for their children, such as occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and child psychology, but because the waiting lists in the public health system are so long it is having a detrimental impact on children's development. Can she elaborate on her experience of that?

Ms Karin Jonsson: Many parents come to us because they have decided that they need to go private because of a waiting list. Those waiting lists include an assessment of needs, speech and language therapy or play therapy. Sometimes children have experienced highly traumatic situations and are not coping, but there is nothing for them that is free or low cost. Many organisations provide different kinds of support in some of these areas, and we are one of them, but our waiting lists are long.

Parents take a decision to pay privately for as long as they can and then come to us. They are almost sorry for what they have done on one level. They cannot afford food, but their children need an assessment or support almost as much as they need food in order to be able to manage, develop, get something out of going to school and not be traumatised or depressed. There are several examples of that. People wait for a very long time. There are examples of adults doing that, but we are focusing especially on children.

Waiting lists are long everywhere. To some extent, in our area they are, at times, especially long. I know the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on people working in different service providers by the HSE and contact tracing, etc., is also very important. However, when one sees these children and parents one wishes that there could be more resources put into shortening

waiting lists.

Children are sometimes put on a waiting list, but they are there for so long that they are too young for a service and are instead moved to the bottom of the next waiting lists, and nothing seems to happen. That perpetuates a situation of genuine struggle in these families. The children do not start off with the same opportunities or on the same platform as others. Even though food and paying bills is very important, sometimes parents take this decision for the well-being of their child.

Deputy Mark Ward: I again thank Ms Jonsson for all of the work she is doing in our community. I really appreciate it.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It was hard to listen to all of the opening statements without feeling sickened or furious. Some 90,000 children in Ireland live inconsistent parity. The committee has discussed this issue for several weeks, but it has been a consistent issue for generations. To a certain extent, we know what many of the issues and solutions are, and we have done for some time. We have to face up to the failure of the State to address the systematic issues that permit that kind of child poverty to continue.

I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee today and sharing their valuable insights with us. I have a few questions for the St. Vincent de Paul. In its recent pre-budget submission, it highlighted in-work poverty among one-parent families and recommended the removal of the cliff edge for working lone parents by extending the cut-off for jobseeker's transition payments until the youngest child reaches the end of second level education. Could the witnesses describe the difference a measure like that would make?

That document stressed the importance of closing the gap between social welfare rates and the real costs facing households. Could the witnesses elaborate on the importance of benchmarking social welfare payments to an adequate income? The St. Vincent de Paul discussed the role of income inadequacy of a core driver of poverty in one-parent families. It highlighted the importance of benchmarking social welfare rates against the minimum essential standard cost of living. If the witnesses could elaborate on that for the committee, it would be very helpful.

The St. Vincent de Paul provides particular insight into the importance of tailoring employment and training supports in enabling lone parents to increase their working hours and gives example of what measures it has in mind. On that kind of furious and sickened note, do any of the other witnesses want to comment?

Even with all of those changes and the different things we could do a terms of budgets and social welfare payments, without State provision of childcare, is it possible to reduce the gap in terms of one-parent families being six times more likely to experience poverty to that extent? Without childcare provision for one-parent families that is accessible and free will we ever get rid of that? My mother was a single parent and went out to milk the cows every day. It is an almost impossible task to go to work when people have children and cannot afford childcare. Without childcare provision, will all of the other measures bring one-parent families to the same level as two-parent families?

Chairman: I thank the Deputies.

Ms Niamh Kelly: On the question of childcare, I agree with the Deputy that without childcare, it is very difficult to see how we can address things like ensuring access to employment and education. The same extends to a variety of other areas. For example, we know that one-

parent families are more likely to be in insecure and poor quality housing. Without a secure place to live, it is very difficult for families to engage in things like education or get access to employment because they are so concerned about keeping a roof over their heads.

The Deputy mentioned benchmarking, which is something we see as crucial because without a standard of living that meets people's needs they cannot survive or get by. They cannot think about anything outside their immediate crisis circumstances. It is imperative that the payments made to families through the Department of Social Protection are enough to meet their needs.

We see a good example in this regard from the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice research over the last number of years. Social welfare payments to older households, through measures taken at Government level, have been sufficient to meet their needs and over the last number of years those households have fared adequately - I do not want to say well - in terms of social protection. We see at the opposite end with one-parent families that where families are on working family payment, for example, they are faring particularly badly. Under the most recent budget, they were seen to come out slightly below the cost of living increases. The measures are there. The benchmarking of social welfare is something that can be included in a targeted approach to families, but it needs the other service pieces. It requires things such as childcare, housing and access to employment and education to be addressed.

In terms of education, there are a number of good schemes available. Often parents are not made aware of them or they are not given a pathway to enter the schemes for education or even employment. We hear time and again from parents who say they are being activated into a particular role that does not suit their skills set or that they would like to get back into education to upskill. To address child poverty families need to be earning a decent wage whereby they can pay for their housing costs and all the costs associated with raising children. These families want to provide for themselves. They want to be able to get ahead and to have enough education to build a life for themselves, rather than just constantly relying on social protection. A key part would be addressing a number of anomalies in the system.

There are a number of issues with regard to education. For example, the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant is not available for part-time courses. That is a real barrier for one-parent families, particularly when their childcare needs are taken into account. There are other anomalies. If somebody is on jobseeker's transitional payment, JST, or one-parent family payment and is in receipt of rent supplement, the person is automatically moved back to the training and education allowance, which precludes the person from getting a SUSI maintenance grant. There was a good example last year. The Minister for Social Protection implemented a law called Catherine's law which stopped the means testing of PhD stipends for people in receipt of disability allowance, yet the means testing still exists for people on one-parent family payment and jobseeker's transitional payment.

These are some examples of technical issues in the system that could be ironed out and benefit families, but these small technical changes have to be underpinned by a widespread benchmarking of social protection against a minimum essential standard of living. The way to achieve that refers back to what Ms Kiernan said about the need for a national child poverty strategy. All the measures we are discussing today are of value and it is worthwhile looking at implementing them, but without that overarching strategy there is no coherent approach and no protection for children against shocks to the system that could come. For example, inflation is a big issue at present. What we need is a concerted effort from the Government that is long-term, sustainable and looks at all these different areas and brings them together.

I hope that answers the Deputy's question.

Dr. Tricia Keilthy: I thank Deputy Cairns for her question. As regards the cliff edge, I will add to what Ms Kelly outlined. In the case of the jobseeker's transitional payment, once the youngest child reaches the age of 14 years, a recipient must either switch to the working family payment or move to jobseeker's allowance. That means that a lone parent who is working full-time will lose €53 per week simply because the youngest child has turned 14 years old. The parent cannot take up any more hours because he or she is already working full-time, so there is no way for the parent to increase his or her income. The parent is left with this loss of income at a time when he or she has a teenager. Raising teenagers is more expensive in terms of the costs to households. They are still in school and the parent still has all the care and responsibility. Extending it until the end of secondary school would mean that the cliff edge at that point is removed. The children are then over the age of 18 years and perhaps going into college. They can then move onto other payments at that point, where there is an opportunity maybe to engage with training and there is still income support.

Lone parents need the social protection system to recognise their additional caring responsibilities, and they need to be treated differently because of that. That is very important. This is a legacy of the drastic cuts and changes to the one-parent family payment that took place from 2014 onwards. Many of them have been rolled back and we have seen improvements in the living standards of some lone parents, but there are still critical and entrenched issues in terms of how the social protection system and in-work supports are designed for lone parents. It is a very complex system, so streamlining it would be very effective in supporting lone parents throughout their children's lives.

To add to what Ms Kelly said about benchmarking, it is about using evidence to drive how our social welfare system is set. At present, it is arbitrary and totally inadequate. There is still a gap of €82 between a social welfare income for a lone parent with two children and the cost of a minimum essential standard of living. That is why we have issues related to food poverty and that is why families are cutting back and going into debt. Having a system that is adequately benchmarked and that provides a standard of living for everyone in society, a standard below which nobody is expected to live, would be a progressive and important step in tackling child poverty. It is not cheap to do and it would require changes over a number of budgets. However, as shown in the research we highlighted regarding the cost of poverty to the State every year, it is significantly less than that so it is definitely money well spent in terms of preventing the damaging impacts of poverty on people's lives.

Childcare is fundamentally critical to ensuring that families can get out of poverty and that they have options and choices. At the same time, we must ensure that people who cannot work because they are caring for children with additional needs or a disability have an income that they can live on with dignity. That is why recognising the cost of disability and the full implementation of the recently published Indecon report are also critical to ensure those extra costs are supported through our social welfare system.

Ms Karin Jonsson: I agree with the previous speakers. To add to that, childcare plays a positive and important role in prevention and early intervention with children and families in any situation that might relate to child poverty or issues leading to child poverty. Sometimes childcare is the only service that a family accesses and that can be the way in towards addressing all the different issues and gaining training, education and employment. Childcare places play a very important role in our society and should be available to everybody.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I apologise that I missed my name when it was called earlier. The sound went on me and by the time I got it back it was too late. Many of the questions I had intended to ask have been covered. However, I am always confused by what does not seem to come up very often, especially from a poverty perspective and also when we discuss social welfare. At some point over the past decade or so, the children's allowance was linked to a child attending school. It is as though we have automatically accepted this is the case, when it is supposed to be a universal payment. It was never about education. Some of the poorest women in some of the most poorly resourced communities often experience children dropping out of school young, at 15, 16 or 17 years of age, before they have completed the leaving certificate. We seem to have accepted the policy that if people cannot get the children's allowance form signed by a school to state the child is in school the children's allowance is stopped. This policy impacts some of the poorest families and communities that are already struggling to keep their children engaged in the education system. Perhaps One Family or the Society of St. Vincent De Paul have experience of this. I would love to know the views of the witnesses on this and why it has not come up as a contentious point. It has worked its way into our policy on how we pay children's allowance. A household with high educational attainment receives a universal payment with much less of a risk of the children dropping out of school or having difficulties in school. They are probably from professional backgrounds. We have this universal payment that becomes contingent on your child remaining in the education system. Obviously there is a desire to keep children in the education system. Mothers never want children to leave education but it is not always possible to keep them in it and somehow, we have allowed the children's allowance to be attached to it. Do the witnesses see this as an issue with regard to the discussion on child poverty? I would love to know the witnesses' views on this point.

Ms Niamh Kelly: As Dr. Keilthy has outlined, we support the extension of the jobseeker's transitional payment until-----

Senator Lynn Ruane: No-----

Ms Niamh Kelly: I understand the question but it is a similar point. We support that it is paid until a child reaches the age of 18 and we believe the same should be true for the child benefit payment. It is a protected payment. It is not means tested or taxable. It should be for the course of a childhood rather than linked to the educational attainment of the young person. It echoes the changes to the one-parent family payment, with fairly arbitrary age requirements put on payments that actually do not reflect the reality for families. Often they disproportionately affect the lowest-income families. We definitely support what the Senator is saying in that it should be available to all children under the age of 18. It is not something on which we have been campaigning. It does not come up a lot for us in our services but it is certainly something we would support.

Dr. Tricia Keilthy: I thank Senator Ruane for the question. It is a good point. It is not something that comes up frequently in our services. It is not something on which we have focused. It does complicate things when a letter has to be signed. There were issues over the summer when parents were not able to get the letter signed and there was a loss of child benefit. This is a huge loss for families on low incomes. An issue that is raised consistently with regard to child benefit is the loss of child benefit once a child turns 18, even if that child is still in school. Now that we have transition year and children begin school at six, they are much more likely to be 18 - definitely in sixth year and perhaps in fifth year. The loss of child benefit at that time is massive for families. We have seen it contribute to early school leaving. Child benefit should be payable for all children until the end of secondary school. The cut-off at the

age of 18 has an impact on families. It is an issue that is raised with us quite frequently. In our prebudget submission, we called for child benefit to be available until children finish secondary schools. This is what we have seen in our services and supports.

Senator Lynn Ruane: Perhaps it is this concept that all of a sudden meant it was attached to asking schools to sign the form. When I went to school, I never had to bring a form to the school to prove I was in school so my mother could collect the children's allowance. It is like the decision was made at a policy level. It is something new in the past 17 years. I am trying to think of the age of my daughter and when it started and stopped throughout her lifetime. I agree the payment should not stop at the age of 18 particularly when children start school later. In one sense we are arguing that it should be to the end of second level. This is then in the psyche of policymakers, who attach access to it to being in the education system. To some extent they need to be uncoupled from a policy perspective in order that we do not disenfranchise women. It probably is not raised because people have just accepted that they no longer receive the children's allowance because the child does not go to school. They have also accepted it as a policy intention without there ever having being, in my understanding or memory, a conversation about it. Everyone has just accepted it. It is something we need to start bringing to the fore again for the women in my community who no longer receive children's allowance because their children are having such difficulty attending school. If anyone needs to continue to have support, it is families in this situation. It is about naming it as an issue. For politicians and advocates from a policy perspective, it would be a good time to look at where it came from and why it happened. If it is just a ministerial order, it should be undone.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank everyone who has spoken today. It is very important that we highlight issues with child poverty. It is very hard to think of children in poverty. In Carlow I have been very involved with a group of people and we set up our own food bank. We call it St. Clare's Hospitality Kitchen. We provide up to 80 meals a day. During Covid we had to buy in meals. We also give out a lot of food parcels. I have seen at first hand families who are working and paying their bills and who find it very hard to survive at the end of the week when they have absolutely nothing left. They look for a food parcel. We have to be very careful because there are situations where families are working but they end up with nothing left particularly when they pay their bills. We are always mindful of this.

I have a question for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. According to the opening statement, in 2021 its regional office received more than 191 requests for help and almost 70% of these requests were from families with children. Do the witnesses believe this is an accurate figure? I believe from working in the community that there are families with children who need support but who do not look for it. Do the witnesses feel this is an issue? Is it something they often come across?

Another area I want to speak about is child support. Domestic violence has been very much part of the pandemic and the issue has been highlighted in recent weeks. It is an issue that we need to highlight. There should be more supports for children in this situation. We need to put supports in place, whether through schools or families. There should be supports for children affected by it. Are there enough counselling services? Do children get support? Does the system miss children who need these supports but we are not aware of them?

I want to raise another issue, which I have discussed with the Minister. I have been calling for action on it for the past eight months or a year. I know of families who left schools because they do not qualify for DEIS status. There were no hot meals programmes or breakfast clubs. Some families are now sending their children to schools where they can access hot meals. We

are living in a type of society where we must ensure, and I have been calling for this to happen, that all schools have these programmes, whether they are categorised as DEIS or not. We have been waiting months for the completion of the Minister's review of DEIS status. Schools have applied to the Minister for DEIS status because they are in disadvantaged areas. There has been no report on this subject yet, but I will keep working on it and continue to ask the Minister about it.

All schools, no matter what areas they are in, must now consider providing hot meals, because some families cannot afford hot meals themselves if they are paying a bill. The parents may be making sacrifices themselves, as was said, but if their children were in a school with a hot meals or breakfast programme, then they would at least know they were being fed. Everybody must be able to avail of these programmes. It is important that no children should feel that they are the exception for getting food when others are not. We must be mindful of that aspect.

Turning to the subject of lone parents, I have a major issue with local authorities not building two-bedroom houses. Lone parents on the local authority housing lists come to me, and these are people paying their rent with the housing assistance payment, HAP, and doing their best. They are being told, however, that no two-bedroom houses are available. We must get all the different agencies working together and undertake joined-up thinking. In addition, however, we must ensure that we are building houses, because we do not want to see children living in flats or rented accommodation in the context of HAP. If a house is sold, people can become homeless within three months. Therefore, one-parent families must be given more security. We must work on this issue in conjunction with other areas and bring about joined-up thinking in this regard.

We all know it has been hard during the pandemic. The only good thing the Covid-19 pandemic has done is to highlight the failings in our system, and especially those things that have not been highlighted enough previously. It is sad, in 2022, to have food banks, and endeavours such as St. Clare's hospitality charity food kitchen in my area. We really should not have anyone living in poverty, and we must make this issue a priority for the Government. I thank everybody.

Chairman: I call Ms Jonsson to address the food query.

Ms Karin Jonsson: Yes, we see a wider variety of people accessing the food bank now, compared to the situation at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have only been involved in food bank provision since the end of March 2020. It is not that families working or with a mortgage were not availing of the food bank before, but a larger proportion of them are now. When they come to us, they tell us they have paid their bills. A young couple who came to us recently told us the husband's money goes to pay the rent and the wife's money goes to pay the bills, and there is nothing left for food. The couple do not have children, but that is their situation. If they had children, their situation might be even worse. Families also come to us who have paid their mortgages and then have nothing left.

Some of the people we are seeing now have never had to look for help before, so they find it very difficult to ask for help in the first place and then to find it. They have never looked for help with food before, but, equally, they may not have had to seek help with mental health or parenting issues either. The closure of the schools made things very difficult for some parents when children were taught at home through Zoom. Some of them came to us and said they had never had to look for help before. Now they do, and they said they were finding it hard to get the help they needed because the process was labyrinthine and difficult. That is certainly true.

Another thing that has affected people who come to the food bank because of the impact of Covid-19 is the delay in social welfare payments. I refer to the delay in the registration of children, which in turn leads to delayed payments of children's allowance and the provision of medical cards. We have seen some families who have just received a bill from the hospital for their baby. They have paid the bill, because they always pay all their bills, and have no money left. They did not have to pay the bill, but they did not know that because they have never had to worry about such a situation that much before.

Equally, young adults who have not reached the age of 24 cannot automatically receive the full rate of social welfare payments. There are ways around that situation, but it takes a long time, and much longer now. One young adult accessing our services has €112 a week. His parents died during the last two years and he is still living in the family home. He is being supported and helped to try to resolve these issues, but it is taking time. It is time that people do not necessarily have when they need food to eat or to have to pay their heating bills. We are seeing more of those types of situations now.

Chairman: I call Dr. Keilthy next.

Dr. Tricia Keilthy: Perhaps Ms McGowan might comment on the requests we are receiving for food and similar aspects.

Ms Rose McGowan: From the number of calls we have received, I agree completely that many people did not access our service and would not phone us. They may feel that they just could not take the last step to make a phone call. In every radio and newspaper interview we have done during the pandemic, we have made certain to say that the only criterion to get our help is need. We have emphasised that people should not be afraid to come to us and we have asked them to do so. Some people, however, will always be uncomfortable coming to St. Vincent de Paul. Many more people are living in poverty than the 190,000 calls we receive.

Turning to the issue of the DEIS schools, I agree completely with Deputy Murnane O'Connor. I have spoken to people who enrolled or moved their children to a DEIS school. It was not only due to the availability of free meals in those schools, but also because classroom sizes are smaller and other supports are available. Therefore, this whole area must be explored. Regarding the food aspect, and to give an example, we had a call just before Christmas from a home school liaison teacher. We work closely with schools and the home school liaison system is wonderful. That teacher, who was in a DEIS school, was working with 12 families who would not access help through us, because they said the neighbours would know, etc. We just put 12 bags of food into the boot of the car and delivered them to the school, with toys and books and other things. The activity operated through the system in confidence.

We advised that teacher to sit down with those families in the new year. It was not possible to visit houses, so what she was doing during the year was having families come into the school one day each week. She could not visit their houses on the other days. Now, she is going to work with those families to let them know there are many ways of getting support, even if they do not want us to come out to them. We have childcare facilities in our resource centres, and that shows how important access to childcare is. People trust the teachers in our childcare facilities and resource centres. A rapport is built up, and that means people can access many more things as a result. Teachers refer people to us and explain what our conferences, which are our branches, do. It might involve help with food, school or whatever.

A great many people are living in poverty and, as the Deputy said, it is not always social

welfare payment recipients. During the first full lockdown, people working had some savings, but they used them all up. There are no savings now. A couple who had both been working came to us recently. They had both lost their low-paid jobs. One had been working in the hospitality sector. They got the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, for which they were grateful. A two-bedroom cottage in the inner city of Dublin cost them €1,800 a month. That was the first thing that had to be paid, and then the rest of their bills. Those two people, who had been working, came to us wondering if we had food. We of course told them to come to the food bank and we helped with a bill, etc. They had no children, but that woman did not realise that we would help with a bill for electricity. It is something for us to look at as well in respect of trying to ensure that we get more information out about what we do. The woman decided to do an online course during Covid to upskill. We helped with the purchase of a laptop. That girl came at Christmas to the food bank to collect because we were doing food plus Christmas food. She came with a box of chocolates, so grateful that we had supported them. They kept their home and kept their bills going. It is to be hoped that in light of the announcement last Friday, they will both be back at work. It is people who are in work at the moment; it is not all social welfare recipients.

Ms Karen Kiernan: I will speak briefly and then Ms Kelly will take over, if that is okay. I wish to address the Deputy's question on family supports and domestic violence. It is not an exaggeration to say there is a crisis for children and their parents in the context of domestic abuse and child abuse and the impact on them. We are learning things now that will haunt us in decades to come in terms of the impact on children. What is there is incredibly insufficient. I refer to the very comprehensive paper on child poverty produced by the council on Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures. There are 11 different areas of concern, one of which is on family support. There is a reason for that, as Ms Jonsson explained earlier. Social welfare rates here may seem high compared with those in other countries but our universal services are very low, so people here have to pay privately for so many things. Prevention, early intervention and family support services, particularly for families experiencing domestic abuse, are critical. We work with one-parent families but people are sharing parenting post-domestic violence and in many cases the domestic abuse continues through into contact visits and sharing. In some cases, ongoing abuse and damage is being done to children and their parents. This may be a family law reform issue, and we can discuss that another day, but it is linked to poverty as well. I will hand over to Ms Kelly.

Ms Niamh Kelly: I will address a couple of the other areas the Deputy mentioned. She referred to the hot school meals programme. I agree that it should be available more widely and that it is a key way to tackle food poverty among families with whom we work. The Deputy's point in respect of DEIS schools is key. This relates not just to hot school meals, but to all supports offered through DEIS. We know that more than half the children who are experiencing disadvantage are not in a DEIS school and do not have access to those supports. We would like to see a system that follow the child so that the children who are disadvantaged but in a non-DEIS school would still have access to those supports. We would like schools that do not have cooking facilities to be able to access the national development plan to retrofit the schools and get better cooking and dining facilities. The introduction of a hot school meal programme in a school has a twofold effect on food poverty. The children get fed in school, but they also may be able to participate in the preparation of food and see the preparation of healthy food. That has a kind of sustainable impact on food poverty.

I refer to the Deputy's remarks on local authority housing. The UN rapporteur on housing spoke last year in Ireland and particularly highlighted the impoverished living conditions of

one-parent families. In recent years, it has become an increasingly big issue for the families with whom we work. They have lower rates of home ownership, but also poorer quality of housing. In the context of homeless figures, one-parent families feature heavily. They make up approximately 20% to 25% of families in Ireland but, up until last summer, they represented approximately 50% to 60% of families living in homelessness. I highlight to the committee that the figures on homelessness have not been disaggregated since last summer for two-parent and one-parent families. That is leaving us a little blind and we would like it to be changed such that the figures are divided and show us the picture in respect of one-parent families.

A policy blind spot in terms of housing and throughout the system is that of shared parenting families. We see families where there might not be a formal custody arrangement but dad has custody of the children for half the time and enters into homeless accommodation but cannot access appropriate accommodation for their children. The same is true throughout the housing system. Shared parenting families find it very difficult to access housing for both parents that is suitable for the children. That is really important to maintain the shared parenting relationship. Throughout the system, shared parenting is very much a blind spot. When it comes to housing, social protection and all other areas, people are viewed as either a lone parent or a single adult. That has detrimental effects for the children.

In terms of housing policy, we support what the Deputy said. We definitely need more accommodation built by local authorities and approved housing bodies. We would really like to see a reduction in the over-reliance on the private rental sector to provide social housing. This is a big problem for the families with whom we work because, as all present are aware, top-ups are an issue and the rate of housing assistance payment, HAP, does not always meet the full needs of a property. For a one-parent family, trying to meet that top-up payment is an additional burden. One-parent families are further disadvantaged compared with two-parent families in that situation. As part of, or linking in with, an overall child poverty strategy, we would like to see a family homelessness strategy that addresses some of these concerns and some of the issues arising for one-parent families. Such a strategy would need to speak to and interact with a child poverty strategy such that the two are aligned and working towards the same goals on housing.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I am sorry that I am, unfortunately, coming late to the meeting. I was in the Seanad. I did not get to hear most of our guests' presentations but I am very familiar with the work they do. Indeed, I sent many families to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul through the years and I thank its representatives for all they do in respect of food poverty for families. There are so many wonderful organisations out there, particularly in County Meath, where there is the Meath Food Bank. Ken Smollen in Offaly does great work and delivers to 1,200 families every single month. There is real child poverty out there.

Wearing my other hat, before I was a Senator, I was a county councillor but I also was a foster parent. I saw real child poverty coming through my door on many occasions. The first thing you noticed was the food the children ate and the personal grooming of the children in poverty. As a person from a stable background with full family support, you could tell the children who came from an impoverished household. From their personal grooming and their diet, you could tell that money was not around to support the child growing up into a health lifestyle.

What we really need are far more supports for families and parents. How do we support these parents to help them be better parents and guardians of children? If we do not get that right, we will never be able to fix the issue in respect of poverty. We have to train parents to be better parents. There is family support available from Tusla but people run a mile from that

organisation. They do not want to get involved in that even though the supports are there for families. They just do not want to pick up the phone to call Tusla and tell it they are struggling and need help. The type of housing is a major consideration with child poverty, as well as the communities in which these people live. I agree 100% with Deputy Murnane O'Connor about a hot meals programme being available in all schools. There are people we might think are not impoverished but I assure the committee there are examples in middle class Ireland as well. They pay all the bills but they may not have the necessities to feed their family.

I had an issue with one particular child who came into my care. I will not give a name but she was a 12-year-old girl. I would never have considered the issue but she came in with a hoodie and tracksuit bottoms. She had no other clothing because she came in the middle of the night. The following day, after getting to know her a little bit, I went shopping with her. She told me she is not like the other girls in her class because she does not have any money to get her hair or nails done or wear nice clothes. Everything is a hand-me-down. She said she does not identify as a boy or a girl yet. I said "look it, you are just you for now". I brought her into a shop and the first section she went to was the girls' clothing, where she picked out all these lovely girls' clothes she wanted to buy. I never really thought that poverty could play a part in determining one's gender in life. She was wearing hand-me-downs from her brother and that is all she was getting at home. She had not looked for girls' clothing as a result. As soon as she got the opportunity, she went to buy the little tops and cardigans, along with a pair of trousers. I wondered if children are choosing a gender because they are living in poverty. Could that be a reason for children having gender identity issues? I never really associated poverty with gender identity issues until that very moment. It was certainly an eye-opener for me.

I do not know how we can address that. Is there a programme for young girls so we can support them with clothing appropriate to their age? I know there are various charity shops, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Do they get much clothing for young teenage girls or is it mainly for adults? Perhaps the witnesses could address those matters?

Chairman: Before having the witnesses reply, I wonder if Senator Erin McGreehan is on the call. I know she had to be in the Seanad earlier. If she has anything to ask, she might do so before we wrap this up. With the Dáil and Seanad sitting at the same time as the committee, it can be hard to juggle everything. As these are the final set of questions, witnesses might make any concluding remarks now as well.

Ms Karen Kiernan: The Senator asked a very interesting question about family support and how to support parents. In Ireland, we have gradually moved to a more positive parenting structure. An example of where we are not doing it, however, is the child benefit issue raised by Senator Ruane earlier, which is a punitive measure on the child and parent. Much of the structure we have, whether it is in the voluntary sector, Tusla or the HSE is predicated on positive parenting and supporting people to do their very best. It is a massively under-resourced sector compared with other countries in terms of getting a focus on prevention and early intervention right. Tusla has a very difficult job because it has so many crises that are expensive to deal with. We know that if we invest universally for children in family supports, it brings much better results.

We can look at Scandinavian countries, where parenting support is not stigmatised. That is because every parent, whether it is a first or fifth pregnancy, does a parenting programme. It is completely universal and non-stigmatising. The voluntary organisations are funded in a way to support people with parenting challenges and the state has a different role in terms of supporting the child and keeping them safe. There is perhaps more of a distinction than we have in Ireland

and that is one way in which this could work well.

One Family is 50 years old this year and we were set up as Cherish back in 1972 and we still work with many women who do not want to be pregnant or be parents but who end up parenting. That is a really difficult position and there are frequently not the kind of therapeutic and practical supports for them and their child that would allow them to bond and have a lifelong relationship. A reluctant mother is not spoken about widely but such people are real. They exist and this can happen in any socioeconomic background. It is important that infant and mental health services continue to be supported and built on in this country.

The Senator had a question about transgender young people and queries about gender identity. I know from my own life that this is a very complex area and, with respect, I suggest it is not linked to the availability of clothing. It is probably a little more complicated than that but it may be that a young person was perceived to be male or teased as being male because of clothing. That may not relate specifically to gender identity, although it is possibly a discussion for a more expert organisation, such as BeLonG To. It would be very helpful in that area.

My main concluding message is that we believe there is a very valuable and comprehensive report on child poverty that has been prepared and made available to the Minister, Deputy Roderic O’Gorman, and this committee. It lays out the structure, research and 11 areas of focus, with recommendations under each one. That is the pathway to developing a national child poverty action plan, which is what we need in Ireland. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is currently leading with the EU Child Guarantee and an action plan to go with that, it is somewhat small-scale. The funding coming from that is small-scale compared with what we need. We need a higher level national child poverty action plan and we really hope the committee will be able to support the development of that in partnership with us and others over the coming months and years.

Chairman: We received that report and it was circulated to members. We have had a number of hearings on child poverty. When we, as a committee, draft our report we will certainly look to the report sent by One Family. It has been very helpful and I thank One Family for sending it.

Dr. Tricia Keilthy: I thank the Senator for her questions and raising some important points. We can speak to our experience of parenting support. We conducted research in 2018 involving interviews with 30 families living in poverty. That indicated in detail their experience of living below the minimum essential standard of living. For those parents, there was much shame and guilt associated with their children growing up in poverty. They did everything they could to minimise the impact of poverty on their children’s lives, trying every way they could to ensure they were able to do what other children take for granted, such as going on school trips, having nutritious food when they could afford it and things like that. There was much feeling of guilt in those parents when they had to say “no” to their children.

We asked the parents what they wanted or what would help their situation. Across the board, it was really about good quality jobs, being able to access training that would support them in getting better quality jobs and almost every family said childcare was the number one need. In our experience, it is a lack of income and not a lack of parenting ability that influences a child’s experience of poverty. Those parents just need the right supports at the right time to ensure they can build a better life for their children. That is really about ensuring we have affordable childcare and affordable housing that is accessible and of good quality.

The Senator raised a really important point around standards. We see families who are in very poor-quality accommodation. Due to the current state of the market, they feel they have no other option but to accept very substandard accommodation, in particular in the private rental sector. We need to ensure housing is of good quality, as well as being affordable, because energy poverty is a very real issue for many families.

We spoke about food poverty a lot, and we see it in almost every facet of community organisations. It is a symptom of wider issues. In our experience, when times are tough, the one area families have discretion over is the food budget. It comes down to addressing the drivers of food poverty, such as low pay and inaccessible public services, and ensuring that families are supported. The blueprint is in the Better Outcomes, Brighter Future paper. We know what policies are needed. We know what the problems are. It is now about taking action and ensuring that the resources are there to address this for once and for all.

Ms Karin Jonsson: It is expensive to be poor. People cannot bulk buy or afford energy bulbs. People may not have transport and instead have to do their shopping in a corner shop or nearby convenience store because they cannot access larger supermarkets where prices might be cheaper. That is a hindrance.

There are a lot of things many people could do, such as learning about budgeting, cooking and storing food, but as long as people do not have surety of food now, a home or the ability to pay an electricity bill, there is no way they can focus on those things. We need people to escape the immense stress and trauma of not having the very basics. When security is there and the stress is lifted, we can then start talking about the things that might make life even better, such as training, education, cooking, budgeting, giving up cigarettes or whatever else it might be. That is not something people can deal with when they do not know if they are going to have an enough food tomorrow or be able to heat their houses.

This is a long-term process. Policy changes and changes in society will help, as will the work local organisations can do to support people. It is not going to happen overnight, even when we work with families. They need to build trust with us and befriend us, which takes time. When we give that time and put in that effort, things can change fundamentally for a family and the next generation.

The girl to which a Senator referred reminded me of one thing we have noticed, namely, period poverty. We have linked in with an organisation addressing period poverty Dublin a couple of times, which is great. When we have funds, it is something we can spend some money on because we notice how very popular and important those items are. They may not seem very expensive, but in many families women and girls are not getting enough period products.

I thank everyone for their invitation and being able to share some of our information and stories. I look forward to whatever good happens in the future.

Chairman: I want to express our very sincere thanks to Ms Kiernan and Ms Kelly from One Parent Family, Dr. Keilthy and Ms McGowan from the St. Vincent de Paul and Ms Jonsson.

I do not know if “interesting” is the correct word because this is such a difficult topic, but Ms McGowan put it very well when she said in 2022 we are still talking about food poverty and families in Ireland not being able to afford food. That is not a good reflection on our society. This has been helpful for us because we are examining the overall topic of child poverty, on which we will compile a report. I appreciate the witnesses coming before us and answer all of

JCEDIY

the questions posed. It is to be hoped we will have ongoing engagement on other topics with the witnesses. I thank members. Is it agreed to publish the opening statements on the Oireachtas website? Agreed.

The joint committee adjourned at 5.35 p.m. until 3 p.m. on Tuesday, 1 February 2021.