

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOIMIRCE SHÓISIALACH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROTECTION

Déardaoin, 12 Eanáir 2017

Thursday, 12 January 2017

The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Maria Bailey,	Senator Catherine Ardagh,
Deputy John Brady,	Senator Kevin Humphreys.
Deputy Gino Kenny,	

In attendance: Deputy Denise Mitchell.

DEPUTY JOHN CURRAN IN THE CHAIR.

Issues Facing Lone Parents: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: I welcome Ms Valerie Maher and Ms Karen Kiernan of One Family and Mr. Mike Allen, Ms Alison Connolly and Ms Ann-Marie O'Reilly of Focus Ireland. I thank them for attending. We appreciate it. The format of the meeting will be quite straightforward. I will ask One Family and Focus Ireland to make their opening presentations and we will then take questions from members and replies from the witnesses, if that is acceptable

Who will be making the opening statement for One Family?

Ms Karen Kiernan: I will. I thank the Committee on Social Protection for the opportunity to address it-----

Chairman: I apologise, I have made a major mistake. Before that-----

Ms Karen Kiernan: The Chairman needs to warn us.

Chairman: Yes, I must read out the warning. I apologise.

Before things get completely out of control, I wish to draw the attention of the witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(f) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Opening statements they have submitted to the committee will be published on the committee website after the meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. Finally, and once again, I ask that anyone who has a mobile phone turn it off. My apologies for nearly omitting the warning. Ms Kiernan will start.

Ms Karen Kiernan: One Family is delighted to be here in order to raise the important issues relating to lone parents in the context of social protection. We are Ireland's organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting or separating. We have been in existence since 1972, when we were established as Cherish, and we provide a range of parenting and family supports in Dublin and throughout Ireland to one-parent families. We also do policy work and have a membership system. We do a lot of practice-to-policy work. What we are saying is based on evidence from parents and families with whom we work. Children are really at the heart of what we do, and the question how to support parents to be the best possible parents they can in difficult circumstances for their children is the prism through which we see everything.

The families with which we work and which we represent come from all kinds of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. There is no stereotype or particular type of person who may find himself or herself in the position of parenting alone. People arrive in the position from a very wide range of circumstances, but a very typical lone parent is a female in her 30s with one child. She is probably sharing parenting with the father, although there is no specific research to support this. She is probably in low-paid part-time employment, which is part of the difficulties we will consider today, and living in poverty.

Longitudinal research in Ireland and other countries has shown that children do just as well in one-parent families as in two-parent families and that the real issues are poverty and the difficulties in accessing the right services and education. If one controls for these factors, children do just as well in both family types, so many of the negative stereotypes to which parents can be subjected are unfounded and unfair.

One in four families with children in Ireland today is a one-parent family, and one in five children lives in a one-parent family. This is, therefore, a common type of family; it is no longer an aberration. We know from looking across Europe and from studies there that we can expect families to continue to diversify. We see more people separating and divorcing, albeit at very low rates in comparison to our neighbours. They are still growing and diversifying. We see more people in step-parent families and blended families. Part of what we want to highlight is that our services, policies and laws need to be able to cope with such diversity and not just see things in a very rigid and more traditional way which focuses on the “male-breadwinner, married, mammy-daddy” family. Families are much more interesting, diverse and challenging in those ways as well. The context of our submission is the reform and cuts introduced in budget 2012, which impacted hugely on lone parents, as was well rehearsed in the Houses of the Oireachtas and in wider society. These reforms and cuts were unprecedented. I believe the intent of this reform never came to pass but led instead to many parents having to leave work or being faced with higher levels of poverty. The statistics show that as a result of these cuts and reforms, there are more children living in poverty. For example, there was an immediate 40% reduction in the payments to lone parents who were in work and in receipt of the family income supplement, FIS. At that time, as there were not many jobs available, there was no cross-departmental planning in this area and child care and after-school care were not considered. We believed from the outset that this reform would fail and believe it has failed although studies, research and impact assessments in this regard have yet to be done, from which we will learn more in due course.

Lone parents want to work. Many are working but many are challenged because of the lack of access to suitable child care, education and training and in-work assistance, as well as family-friendly employment. Some of the points we propose to speak to today will hit on issues such as how to make work pay, child poverty, in-work supports and improving access to education for lone parents. I am sure it is well known that poverty rates are always highest among lone parents. According to the most recent data, those living in lone-parent households continue to experience the highest rates of deprivation, with almost 60% of individuals from such households experiencing one or more forms of deprivation. This compares with 29% of the general population who experience deprivation. As such, an individual living in a one-parent family is twice as likely to live in deprivation. Children living in one-parent family households are almost twice as likely to live in poverty as other children and 23% of children in a one-parent family experience deprivation. This is not a situation any of us would like to see continue. We welcome the commitment in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures - the national children and young people’s strategy - to lift 97,000 children out of poverty. However, since publication of that strategy the target has been raised because more children have moved into poverty. We believe that the focus of these measures must be on children living in one-parent families because they are consistently the poorest, twice as likely to live in poverty and the most socially excluded in Ireland. We note the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone, have publicly committed to reaching the target on child poverty and we welcome those commitments.

I am a member of the advisory council for Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures. A subgroup

of that council has worked in partnership with the Department of Social Protection specifically on child poverty and trying to develop targets and measures to implement a plan on the reduction of child poverty. That group was co-convened by the Children's Rights Alliance and the Department of Social Protection and it has been a useful constructive process, although we have a long way to go. We now have an NGO report with a set of recommendations for all Departments. This is not just an issue for the Department of Social Protection because, as we know, poverty is interconnected across the Departments. We have set out what we believe the Government should be doing. The Department of Social Protection is collating inputs from other Departments and it will produce its own report on what the Government should be doing. We believe that targeted income supports remain the most effective measure to reduce child poverty in specific families. Rather than increasing universal payments, we need to target income supports.

On child maintenance, in one-parent families there is frequently another parent who may or may not be taking financial or other types of responsibility for his or her child or children. This is an extremely complex area. The way in which maintenance interacts with social welfare payments can cause hardship for children and parents. We have had discussions on this issue with officials from the District Court and the Department of Social Protection and we are hopeful that we will be able to improve some of the processes in place in that regard. However, if one looks at the big picture, other countries take responsibility to ensure that children are not poor. They guarantee payments to families and try to recoup them from the other parent rather than relying on individual parents to do the right thing or to be able to do the right thing, which does not always work in the real world. We believe there should be a more transparent, innovative and consistent approach to how maintenance is dealt with for social welfare customers to prevent their children living in poverty.

I will hand over to my colleague, Valerie Maher.

Ms Valerie Maher: As Karen said, the second half of the presentation will focus on access to education and in-work supports. I will start with education because rather than taking a work first approach we must examine an education first approach in the context of low educational attainment among lone parent households. We welcome the commissioning of an examination of some of the barriers lone parents face in accessing higher education. It is being conducted by Dr. Delma Byrne and her colleagues at Maynooth University. We have contributed to that and I understand they have been given an extended amount of time to include the voice of lone parents. It is imperative that we talk to all of the people involved and particularly the people who are impacted most. Research has shown that better educated parents have better educated children and that those children have better social and emotional outcomes and better health. For families headed by a lone parent, the education level of the mother is more important for children's well-being than the type of family structure in which they live. Educating lone parents is essential. This offers a clear rationale for supporting lone parents to access education, thus improving their children's outcomes.

Unfortunately, what we hear from the lone parents we work with is that it is not so much that they do not wish to access education, but that there are a number of barriers in place that prevent them from doing so. We hope that whatever findings arise from the report from Maynooth University will be taken on board and that appropriate policy responses will be put in place, regardless of the investment that might be required to do that. The recommendations we have included in our submission to the committee are recommendations we have put forward many times over the last couple of years in our pre-budget submissions, so they are not new.

With regard to specialist bridging programmes, One Family has developed the New Futures programme. It acknowledges that many lone parents are distant from the labour market and need specific supports to get them back into education or employment. Our programmes look at some of the barriers lone parents might have internally relating to motivation and self confidence, help them with some of the practical barriers there are in place and offer them specific supports to get back into education.

We believe jobseeker's transition payment should be extended to parents who are engaging education, regardless of the age of their youngest child. Currently, if lone parents whose children are over 14 years of age wish to engage in education they must transfer to back-to-education allowance, but there is an issue with that regarding access to the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, maintenance grant. The link between housing tenure and people's access to supports to enter education must be broken. It is unfair that somebody living in social housing can stay on their jobseeker transition one-parent family payment and avail of the SUSI maintenance grant, which is an essential support for child care, travel to university and the various costs associated with education. In the absence of having that additional income from SUSI it is practically impossible for lone parents to access education and improve their future outcomes.

With regard to in-work supports, labour market reforms must acknowledge the importance of balancing parenting and work. Lone parents have sole parenting responsibility and that must be taken into account when we are trying to activate lone parents into the labour market. Some of the specific challenges lone parents face include the lack of affordable child care and precarious work, such as zero-hour contracts. Policies are required which promote access to employment, support the work of parenting and offer more flexible work contracts to allow parenting to take place in conjunction with work.

Transitioning from welfare to work is not a simple transition for many people. It is a complex issue that involves input and understanding from all Government Departments, not just the Department of Social Protection. It is necessary that parents understand this complex system and that they are not just being pushed through into work without a full understanding of why that is happening. As a result of the one-parent family payment reforms, lone parents with children over 14 years of age must now transfer to jobseeker's allowance. With that comes the conditionality of being available for and seeking full-time work. This particular cohort has been disproportionately impacted because for a start, if one's child is 14 or 15, he or she spends four to five months of the year outside of school so the idea that such families no longer need child care is not true. In many cases, this cohort would have been in receipt of social welfare payments for a long time. We hope that officials in the Department have an understanding of that and that front-line staff are given appropriate training to support these people into work and that conditions are not being applied without recognising some of the challenges they face. We know that lone parents at work have been negatively impacted by the reforms and many have not gained financially. This can disincentivise employment, which goes against the point of the reforms.

It goes without saying that affordable and accessible child care is essential for lone parents to work. Lone parents who participate in the workforce or who are engaged in education and training require care for their children. They do not have somebody else in the household to assist them with that and must have affordable and accessible child care to be able to access education or work. There has been a public consultation on the new single affordable child care scheme which it is proposed to commence in September. We have some specific concerns on that scheme and our full submission to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is avail-

able on our website, the link to which is contained in our written submission to this committee. We are particularly concerned about the schemes currently available which have capped weekly fees, with parents paying between €15 and €25 per week. Under the new proposal, such schemes will be scrapped. Quite a high number of lone parents access those schemes currently and we are concerned that child care fees will increase for those lone parents. Our recommendation is that the Department of Social Protection should liaise closely with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in order that there is an understanding of how the two interact and nobody is sanctioned or made to enter education or employment as a result of the conditionality of his or her payment in the absence of affordable and accessible child care.

We believe that lone parents in receipt of the jobseeker's transitional payment should be seen as a distinct group with a specific set of needs. Indeed, that has been acknowledged by the Department by virtue of the fact that the payment has been set up. There is an opportunity to expand the availability of the payment to lone parents whose children are over 14 and who want to access education. This would take away some of the barriers faced by that cohort. We welcome the increase in the income disregards and the small increase in basic social welfare payments announced in the budget. However, there needs to be a broader understanding and awareness of people who are in receipt of overlapping provisions or additional supports from the Department and the impact of these increases. For example, a lone parent who is working part time and in receipt of rent supplement will not benefit financially from the increases because the social welfare increases are accompanied by a proportionate decrease in the rent supplement. A lot of these things can be confusing for lone parents and the system can be complex in that regard.

I have already mentioned our recommendation regarding lone parents whose children are over 14 and who want to access education. We also recommend that lone parents in employment whose children are aged between seven and 14 be allowed to receive the jobseeker's transitional payment and the family income supplement together. We further recommend that the qualifying hours for family income supplement be reduced to 15 per week. In the context of the reforms, a number of lone parents have found it very difficult to increase their hours of work and have not been able to access the family income supplement as a result.

We believe that lone parents who are in receipt of social welfare supports should be allowed to participate in community employment, CE, schemes but should be offered an additional payment of €50 per week as opposed to the standard €22.50 payment. This is just an acknowledgement of the costs of going to work, travel expenses and so forth and we believe it would incentivise more lone parents to use CE schemes as a bridge to entering full-time or part-time employment.

We welcome the opportunity to continue to work constructively with policy makers and relevant Departments, particularly the Department of Social Protection with which we have a very good relationship. We want to ensure that children in one-parent families become less likely to grow up in poverty and that Ireland becomes a fairer place for all families.

Finally, I wish to advise the committee that we intend to launch a report on the national survey we conducted on shared parenting. It will be launched in the Mansion House on 13 January and we would welcome members to the launch. Some of the issues arising from the survey pertain to social protection. They include issues related to maintenance and difficulties being experienced by people who are sharing parenting in accessing payments from the Department of Social Protection. We would welcome the attendance of members.

Chairman: I thank Ms Maher. Before inviting the representatives of Focus Ireland to make their presentation, I ask One Family to forward a copy of its report to the joint committee after tomorrow's seminar. We will then circulate it to members.

Mr. Mike Allen: I thank the Chairman and members for inviting us to discuss the issues facing lone parents. It is interesting that the joint committee is examining these issues with One Family, whose view is broadly focused on lone parents, and Focus Ireland, which has a view on homelessness. As neither organisation has much expertise in the area of the other, the joint committee may learn a great deal from examining the issue from two perspectives, and that is welcome.

Focus Ireland is one of the leading housing and homelessness organisations. We are appearing before the joint committee because we have been designated by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive as the homeless action team for families in the city. We are directly providing case management and support to the majority of the 1,000 homeless families in Dublin and other supports to the remainder of this group. With funding from Tusla, the Health Service Executive, the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government and local authorities, we are also providing children's supports to families which need them. We also do specialised work on young people, particularly those leaving care, and on Housing First, which is very topical.

Much of what we say is drawn from the experiences of the family housing action team and front-line staff working with families. This is augmented by the work we do in research and policy, an area in which Ms Connolly works. We are trying to bring both areas together, which involves a large amount of analysis, figures and so forth. Before addressing these matters, it is important to remind everyone that behind every number is a family, parent or parents struggling to survive in the circumstances in which they find themselves. These families are trying to raise their children and they worry about their children's future. This is a humanitarian problem and while we must use our brains and statistics when trying to address it, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with an issue that is fundamentally wrong and should not be allowed in society. I know everyone shares that view.

In our submission, we have provided information on what we know about homelessness. Of the 1,200 families experiencing homelessness, the overwhelming majority are in Dublin. While the number of homeless families outside Dublin has increased recently, the increase in the number of homeless families in Dublin has slowed down. This has been driven by a number of factors which we can discuss if members wish to explore them.

I understand, however, that the focus of the joint committee is to explore how homelessness is impacting on lone parents. The official figures and our experience show that 65% of families in emergency accommodation are lone parent families. However, as we heard, lone parent families account for approximately one quarter of families in the general population. It is clear, therefore, that the problem of family homelessness is falling disproportionately on lone parents. Why is this the case and what is causing this? In our submission, we outline a little of what we know in general about family homelessness, which is important. We know that most families living in emergency accommodation had their last secure home in the private rented sector. As yet, we have seen virtually no families who were previously owner-occupiers, although we all live in fear of this happening.

As I have stated previously at meetings of Oireachtas committees, it must be acknowledged that this is not a phenomenon but demonstrates that the policies being implemented by succes-

sive Governments to prevent owner-occupiers entering homelessness have been successful and, therefore, should be continued. A similar concern should be extended to other groups because it is not an accident that families who were owner-occupiers have not ended up in homeless services, although some may yet do so. There is a broad range of things driving those who had lived in the private rented sector out. These include rising rent levels and an inability to meet rising rents, either because rent supplement was not increased for a long period of time or because wages were too low, and the fact that working parents are being seen in emergency accommodation now illustrates this. A part of the picture that has really been growing over the last while, and we have raised this elsewhere and people will be familiar with it, is the increasing phenomenon of landlords selling up or using their accommodation for their own family.

There is also an identifiable group that is very much harder to put a proportion on. This is new family formations where people, usually a very young parent or parents with very young children, have been living in their family home and have attempted to set up an independent home but have failed to do so because of rental issues and so on. We are not going to put a percentage on this group because there has not been enough work done on it, but it is definitely there. There are solutions to it, which are different from the ones to the general housing situation, but which have not been adequately applied.

We are inevitably, and correctly, focused on the current temporary problem of economic homelessness. The old problem, the endemic problem, of homelessness caused by social causes, mental health issues, domestic violence in the case of families, in particular, addiction issues and all those other causes, is still there. One of the serious things we need to guard against in the current crisis is that we do not turn our eye away from those continuing social problems because we are so concerned with this issue. If we do not address them, when we come to the end of the economic problem whenever that might be, and the sooner the better, we will find ourselves with a substantial number of individuals and families who have been homeless for very long periods of time and who have not had their underlying social issues addressed, because we have been looking elsewhere. As a civilised and wealthy society we have to be capable of doing several things at once.

The points I made so far are true of all families. Why then are we finding such a high proportion of lone parent families being affected? The first and most obvious thing, and it has already been referred to by One Family, is that all the evidence shows that there is a higher risk of deprivation and poverty among lone parent families. Inevitably when all the factors which are driving homelessness are related to deprivation and poverty, they are going to fall more heavily on those families. We should not be surprised that is the case. Other factors which would appear indiscriminate such as landlords selling up, and where that is to do with the nature of the landlord rather than the nature of the tenant, seem to fall equally on lone parents and one-parent families. Before an individual family enters homeless services there is a period of time where it tries to deal with the crisis that has arisen. It is very easy to understand why, when faced with an eviction notice lasting a number of months, a two-parent family might find it easier to find alternative accommodation than a one-parent family. Even as a result of evictions, the flow into homelessness which is being seen is primarily impacting on lone parent families.

I have also mentioned new family formations. I will talk a bit more about domestic violence as a cause. We find in our data and in the front-line experiences of our staff that domestic violence is an immediate cause of homelessness for a significant number of families. Inevitably those families are going to emerge as one-parent families in emergency accommodation, but we are only seeing part of the picture. The primary response to that issue is through the Tusla-

funded domestic violence services. It is not anybody's fault, but it should be noted that the way that the data are collected is a problem. The data Tusla-funded domestic violence services collect, and in these cases the families are just as homeless as the ones in the hotels, are not aggregated and we do not get an overall picture. As a result, we might have an underestimation of the extent to which domestic violence and family breakdown are causes of homelessness. That needs to be watched quite closely because it is an important issue. It is not unrelated to the economic issues. There is an evident rise in family tensions and domestic violence during periods of economic tension. This in absolutely no way justifies it; it is simply an observation. They are not unrelated but we are not getting the full picture when we look just at the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government's statistics in that regard. The experience of emergency accommodation is tough for every family but it is additionally tough for lone parents. The sorts of issues of which people are particularly aware and which are very high on the agenda are access to education and parents needing to bring their children long distances to schools across the city. Obviously that is going to be more difficult if there is only one parent. Access to food also presents a difficulty, for example, where some emergency accommodation facilities have perfectly reasonable rules that children cannot be in the kitchen or left on their own in their room. Those two perfectly reasonable rules end up putting the lone parent into an impossible position. These are just examples. If the committee wants further examples Ms O'Reilly can provide more detail of the sorts of issues on the ground.

In this context, while there is a lot to complain about and much more needs to be done, it is really important to recognise what is being done. We specifically mention the actions such as action 1.5 in Rebuilding Ireland and the work of the Departments of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government and Children and Youth Affairs with which we worked closely in supporting last years' pilot scheme for travel to school costs and the innovative scheme that makes sure all families in emergency accommodation can have the same access to early childhood education that other families have. To allow that same access, one needs to have specific rules because of the difficulties faced. It needs to be said that Tusla and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs are involved in that and they work closely with us to try to understand what those changes need to be and in putting them in place. That is a very positive thing.

We outlined some of the research we are doing in the area and I will sum up the sort of things that need to be done. This is a policy committee and obviously the members need to understand the problems but it also wants to change things for the better. Most of the things that need to be done for one-parent families who are homeless are the same things that need to be done with family homelessness - for everybody - and with lone-parent families in general. There is a limited amount of stuff that is specific to this group. It is being hit from both sides and it must be tackled at the roots. For prevention, we emphasise the reform of the private rental sector in order that it is a stable and secure place for people to live, the introduction of family mediation services to be piloted and explored and proposals to explore whether some of those newly formed families could actually go back to live where they were previously for a time, rather than living in emergency accommodation. There is also a need for more effective advice and information. During the year we ran - with the Department of Social Protection and using a Focus Ireland letterhead - a pilot programme where it sent out a letter to everybody on rent supplement in the Dublin 15 area. We are currently writing up the impact of that. It is very positive and proves that we can reach people who are not using the existing services. This is not a criticism of those services; it is just that people are not aware of them. It also proved that one can do something if one can get in early enough to turn that around. It targeted the vulnerable groups in that we knew where they were living in the private rented sector. Supporting people out of homelessness is around the two issues of building social housing much faster in

communities where people want to live and prioritising the allocation of that to longer-term homeless families. One can build and take people from the top of the waiting list while leaving families in the homeless accommodation until their lives are completely blighted or one can see these families as the priority in delivering housing. At the moment we are not doing that and we can go into that in more detail. Ireland is not prioritising homeless families for social housing in the way we should be doing, and the previous Government did. Rent supplement rates and HAP rates remain crucial. We also believe there should be additional policing of the rules that were brought in regarding landlords, discrimination and what actually happens when a person is evicted. These are areas that should be explored more. We know that one-parent families are more likely to be in homeless accommodation, but we do not know if they are more likely to stay there. In this crisis we need to concentrate more on how long families find themselves stuck in that situation and making sure certain groups or families will not be forgotten because so many new families are finding themselves homeless. The evidence suggests one-parent families are not more likely to remain in such accommodation because we are supporting a larger proportion of them, but we need much closer data to see where the problems are arising. Several families have told us the changes to the one-parent family payment and the seven year shift to the new transitional payment triggered their homelessness. We are not saying that is true but people believe it is. If I were in the Department of Social Protection, I would be spending a relatively small amount of money to find out if there is a glitch which is causing this problem in order to rectify it. We think that should be done.

In general, a great deal of money is spent on programmes for homeless persons and those living in poverty but very little is spent to find out which of them work. We should be directing a relatively small amount at finding out which policies are successful and which are failing in order that we can be more successful and do not leave it to organisations such as Focus Ireland and One Family to carry out that research.

Chairman: That was an interesting concluding point. I thank Mr. Allen.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the representatives of Focus Ireland and One Family for coming to meet us. Several groups have already come to present their perspectives on lone parent families and the impact of the changes introduced in 2015.

Both submissions were excellent and contained very useful information. One Family refers to a universal payment to assist the poorest children and increasing the qualified child payment. My party costed that measure and wanted to see a €5 increase, from €29.80 to €34.80, which would have cost €98.6 million in 2017. We have yet to obtain further costings, but the proposal would be worth considering.

We see the impact of the cuts in the back to school clothing and footwear allowance. My party has also focused on that targeted payment. In its presentation the Society of St. Vincent de Paul outlined graphically how the demand on its services had risen substantially when the cuts were implemented. The Department gave us the cost of restoring the rate at just over €14 million. That would represent an increase of €50. We want to increase the allowance over a couple of budgets. I concur with the recommendations made.

The payment of child maintenance has created huge difficulties. We heard a presentation by Single Parents Acting for the Rights of our Kids, SPARK, in which it outlined the difficulties the current set-up was causing for lone parents. If the payment is not paid over it impacts on the family. Other countries have been mentioned. Has thought been given to what happens in other countries? In the UK and the North of Ireland they have the Child Maintenance Service,

where the issue is completely taken away from the parent. That service chases down the other parent, if the address of the second parent is not known. It also works out maintenance rates, which are re-evaluated on an annual basis. There are some good models, and I am wondering if any specific models have been looked at. I am interested in any views on that.

In regard to Focus Ireland, the information supplied was very useful and I thank Ms O'Reilly and Mr. Allen for coming in. A figure which jumped out at me was that 65% of homeless people are lone parent families. That certainly set off alarm bells in my head. I had not heard that figure before. It is very frightening. I would be interested to hear any views on that. There has been a lot of talk recently about rents and rent certainty, and changes have been made. I am interested in hearing any views on the changes that have been brought in. We, in Sinn Féin, have been looking for real rent certainty and index linking any increases to rent. Unfortunately, that was not agreed to but I would be interested in hearing any views on that and any recommendations the witnesses have. I know that is outside the scope of this committee, but I am interested in hearing more on that.

Chairman: I will come back to you, Deputy Brady. You have gone over time. I will come back to you if there is time remaining.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I thank the witnesses for coming in and for their presentations. As my colleague said, they were very enlightening, with a lot of food for thought. One of the things which jumped out at me and which was mentioned by Ms Maher and Mr. Allen was the complexity of the system in terms of lone parents knowing what services and what benefits and supports are available. There is no streamlined system, and what a person is entitled to in the event that he or she requires access to services is not advertised enough. That is something the committee could think about, and perhaps consider ways to streamline the benefit process.

Another issue I am interested in from a legal point of view is in regard to maintenance, and Ms Kiernan mentioned that some governments provide universal maintenance and then recoup that money from the parents, usually the father. I understand that Finland has a system like that which works well, and it is quite aggressive in pursuing payments. It helps women in ensuring that they have a decent maintenance provision.

Some of us come from constituencies in Dublin and know the problems lone parents face in terms of access to low paid employment. It particularly affects my constituency, Dublin South Central, which includes Dublin 12. Demographically we have one of the highest percentages of lone parents in the country, and I meet a lot of women who are in part-time employment, in jobs which pay just above the minimum wage, and they are not able to get access to education which would allow them to get highly skilled jobs to move themselves to the next bracket. As a committee, it should be a priority to get people from the minimum wage bracket into the proper living wage bracket. It is a debate we need to have at this committee, as well as focusing on the effects of housing and education. As Ms Maher said, educational supports are one of the most important issues for lone parents, and that links into child care provision. It is a difficult topic but I am pleased to have the delegates' input.

I agree with Deputy Brady that the new rent-certainty measures must be affecting the delegates' clients directly. I have already had calls from constituents whose landlords increased their rent immediately following the implementation of those measures. It seems a lot of letters were sent out just before Christmas by various landlords. Have the witnesses been fielding similar calls from lone parents?

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I thank both sets of delegates for their submissions and presentations. I agree with Mr. Allen that we must place a greater emphasis on what does and does not work. Sometimes there is a hesitancy around doing that level of research because people are frightened they will get clipped around the ears if the report does not come out exactly as they might want. Mr. Allen referred to the last Government's focus on prioritising social housing. I saw an unintentional consequence of that in the inner city whereby it created a pull to homelessness, with people becoming homeless sooner than needed to be the case. There is a need for careful balancing in any provision and ongoing reviews to ensure there are no such unintended consequences of a particular initiative.

In a report on the back to education scheme, the ESRI has found that people who go into employment rather than education come out of poverty sooner. I am interested in the witnesses' insight on this in respect of their client base. During the Christmas break, I worked out that I interacted with 700 to 800 lone parents last year. We see a wide spectrum in terms of people's circumstances, how the various interventions are working and whether any unintentional consequences are arising. The single most beneficial programme I have seen is the early education intervention, which offers supports to preschool children. I have seen many cases of intergenerational lone parenting, with three generations having the same outcome, even where there has been access to the back to education initiative. In one case, a person obtained good qualifications but never went on to practise as an accountant. There are a lot of interventions in operation but we continue to see the same outcome within family groups.

What is Mr. Allen's view on the need to build automatic reviews into policy decisions? One of the positive things the Department of Social Protection did in respect of the Gender Recognition Act was to include a provision that a review of the legislation be conducted after a year. Sometimes it takes much longer to see how a particular provision is working. I have always considered the back to education scheme to be a very long-term initiative which might not show benefits for families for ten to 15 years. As I said, however, the ESRI report indicates that the most positive impact on a family arises where the head of household goes into work. This has, by far, a more positive impact than that person going back to education. I would have thought the opposite. I would have expected lone parents to be on a relatively low level of income and that there would not be a positive outcome for them.

I very much like the idea of building in an automatic review. However, expecting and accepting that we may not get the answers we like is, as Roosevelt used to say, a case of trying something, hoping it works and doing the research and, if it does not work, moving on and trying something else. We are always too frightened to make mistakes and that stops us from trying new ideas.

I thank the witnesses. I had the opportunity to work with many of them previously. One of the most challenging things we have to try to target is to break down intergenerational poverty through children. From the small amount of research I have carried out, I know that early intervention at preschool level has, by some distance, the most positive impact.

Deputy Maria Bailey: I welcome the representatives from Focus Ireland and One Family to the committee and thank them for the work they do in what are very difficult and often traumatic situations.

I want to pick up on a couple of points that were mentioned, one of which is the fact that child care is the biggest barrier to parents getting back into the workplace. Most parents would rather have a relative or childminder look after their children. Child care providers are very low

down the list for the people to whom I refer.

The Department of Education and Skills has started to examine the possibility of having on-site child care facilities in primary schools, where children would already feel safe and secure in the environment. Most parents already have good support networks with each other in that environment. A number of schools across Dublin - I do not know about rural areas - already provide such services. My children's school started a pilot scheme this year. It is a very small school and the service is a lot cheaper than the fees charged by child care providers. The underlying factor is that there is already a network of support in place for pupils and parents in the school.

I fully recognise that there were cuts in 2012. The circumstances were very difficult and difficult cuts had to happen across the board in recent years. Thankfully, while the increases are small, we are starting to rebuild. The Department of Education and Skills added €160 million to its budget this year to directly target the disadvantaged sectors of society and individuals who find it very difficult to get back into education. Lone parents come under that umbrella and a total of €8.5 million for maintenance grants is being provided this year and next year for parents to get back into education. I do not know how we can get the message out so that people know that such schemes are available.

I welcome the increase in funding for school meals. I know this funding needs to be increased further and the Minister wants to do that this year. We are building on the funding each year. Deputy Brady mentioned a costing carried out by Sinn Féin which indicated that an extra €5 in payments would total €98.6 million. What would we cut in order to get €98.6 million into the sector? Our homeless budget for this year is €98 million, up from €70 million last year. We can calculate figures all we want but in order to come up with additional moneys in a particular area, we often have to make cuts elsewhere.

I want to touch on couple of points mentioned by Mr. Allen. He referred to the reform of the rental sector. I do not want to go into too much detail on the housing sector but I do want to touch on what he mentioned. The planning legislation that was passed before Christmas will commence shortly. It will introduce rent pressure zones. I know Mr. Allen is very aware of what is contained in the legislation, but the underlying issue is supply. The commencement orders for planning applications and planning permissions are well up on last year. We are starting to see a lot more cranes on the horizon. Houses are starting to come back on the market, but all of us in this room know that one cannot build a house overnight. Whether people want to call them developers, builders or other names, one has to give them certainty and encourage them back into the market. The help to buy scheme will do that. I always say it is like a jigsaw, and that there are many pieces that have to come together in order for something to work. Often that takes time and it is like building a house. It takes six to nine months to build a house. We are starting to see that work come to fruition now. Supply is the underlying issue here with people who find that they are homeless.

In the private rental sector, we will give them more certainty now that their rent cannot increase above market value or above 4% per annum. Reform is starting to happen in the rental sector. I want the witnesses to clarify what they mean in regard to individuals who find that they have become homeless not now going to the top of the social housing list. Does this mean that they do not get a council house? The whole purpose of emergency accommodation is that that support and those services are available to those families who need it, including the centre that just opened recently. It is a transition centre for 32 families. We all recognise that children cannot do their homework on a bed, and that one family is too many to find themselves home-

less. That particular centre has homework rooms, dining rooms, crèche facilities, and it is supposed to assist in transition. It is a way to get them into sustainable long-term accommodation, whether that is in the private rental sector, or a council house. Do the witnesses mean that they only want them to get a council house? I want clarification. To me, a family wants security of tenure, certainty, and a home. Whatever that home is, they want to feel safe and have certainty for their family in that home. I agree with Senator Humphreys on that one.

We are accelerating the building of social housing, which comes back to supply as well. That planning Bill will help the private sector as well, and get Part V accommodation back on the market. We are tripling the target for Housing First. There is an increase from the Department of Health for the services provided by Focus Ireland, the Peter McVerry Trust, the Simon Community and so on. Choice-based letting has been piloted and rolled out in other county council areas and we are strengthening the Residential Tenancies Board, not only for landlords, but also for tenants. We are strengthening tenants' rights and seeking to give them the information that they need. There is a lot of reform happening in the private rental sector.

We are not anywhere near where we need to be and I fully recognise that, but as I said, it is a case of many pieces of a jigsaw that have to come together. That takes time. We need more than a year to do that. They are just a couple points. I might come back in.

Chairman: I would like to thank Focus Ireland and One Family for their presentations. I do not want to reiterate the points made but Focus Ireland made a very specific point, which the committee was really taken with, and Deputy Brady referred to it. At the outset, we were told that 25% of families are one parent families, whereas 65% of homeless families are one parent families. That is rather disproportionate to the general population. A specific piece of work needs to be done to identify what the causes are. There is more than one cause and I acknowledge that. If we are to try to address a specific problem, we probably need to know as much as possible, because there is a cohort of people who need to be helped.

We all have anecdotal evidence of the constituents we meet. I met a lone parent family which had become homeless. However, 18 months ago, it was not a lone parent family. There was a relationship break-up and there was transitional accommodation. Their situation eventually fell apart for a whole range of reasons. The relationship break-up may have been as a result of economic stresses and pressures. These situations are very complex. One may see a lone parent family today, but a short time ago that may not have been the case. Why is there that disproportionate 65% figure? We really need to understand that in more detail if we are to try to prevent such situations.

The prevention of people becoming homeless is one of the things that Mr. Allen and other people working with the homeless have always emphasised, and I fully support that. This is a specific cohort of people who are much more vulnerable, much more at risk, and are becoming homeless. We need to know more about that.

I thank One Family for its presentation, which was quite specific and detailed. It rightly referred back to the changes made in 2012, which saw the Department of Social Protection begin to progressively introduce measures to encourage lone parents to return to the workforce. That is the policy position, whether or not one agrees with it, and what flows from that is important. Representatives of the Department of Social Protection appeared before the committee some time later in 2016 because there had been an immediate impact, but there was also the question of whether we were striving to achieve the longer term objective. The representatives made the point that it would take several years to quantify the impact of the reforms. However, the early

indications were that by the end of 2015 more than 3,000 lone parents had become new entrants to the family income supplement scheme. That was an indication that those included in that group had increased the level of their employment participation.

There are two elements I want to address. On the research carried out and analysis made of the longer term benefits, the delegates have rightly acknowledged what happened in year one and so forth, but are we on the road towards achieving the longer term objective announced by the Department? What is the delegates' view of its interim figure of 3,000 at the end of 2015? Is it a meaningful figure?

Deputy John Brady indicated that he might have further questions, but I will let the delegates address those questions first. We will start with One Family.

Ms Karen Kiernan: I thank members for their support. I will take some of the questions, while the others will be taken by Ms Maher who is more expert on education and employment issues.

I will start with the Chairman's question on the longer term impacts of the cuts and reforms. As we acknowledged, the policy intention was to support lone parents in moving into employment and thereby out of poverty and dependence on social welfare payments. At the time, the various supports needed were not available because of the lack of jobs and a departmental plan or owing to the fact that others who should have been taking action were not doing so.

We are aware that more people are in receipt of family income supplement. We welcome this. What we do not know - the review of the reforms taking place this year may tell us - are the longer term impacts. Generally, we hear from people when they are having problems. We sometimes know when things are working out for the better, but we do not always know the full position.

Many supports are needed. The child care provision is only starting and it will be a few years before we will be able to see if it is working for families. We also know that many families found it very difficult to recover in the short term after their payments had been cut. We are now hearing more about people who are considering entering part-time or full-time employment because it appears there are more jobs available. That is helping to lift some people, but they are also finding it difficult to balance the costs, particularly if they are in the private rental sector, in which we know the position is extraordinarily difficult. There are always these difficulties and one difficulty is often followed by another. The reality for a parent is that while one policy may help, something else means that work does not pay. We are looking to have an overall view of the customer, the parent, to make work pay for him or her in all arenas.

I acknowledge the point made about parental separation and the link with homelessness. It has been documented in the figures, although it is broader than parental separation; it is family separation. The trauma when parents separate is massive and inevitably leads to increased levels of poverty, decreased levels of employment and emotional difficulties. We obtained a good deal of information in the recent national survey we conducted of shared parenting. One parent commented that she would like to see a national agency to deal with the consequences of separation. Someone who is separating has nowhere to go to learn how he or she can support himself or herself and his or her family financially, emotionally and physically throughout the long, arduous process of separation which is much longer in Ireland than in other countries. It takes four years before one can think about getting a divorce. It is a difficult process and people fall through the cracks all the time, so I would welcome research to examine why there are more

one-parent families in homeless accommodation. Let us look at the impact of separation on that as well.

As I mentioned in the presentation, we have been having discussions with officials from the Department of Social Protection on maintenance and my understanding is that they are looking at that. The country I was thinking of that takes more responsibility concerning that is Sweden. Senator Ardagh also mentioned Finland. It is basically done to prevent child poverty. I have not looked at this recently, but previously the UK's Child Support Agency was not very successful in doing this, and it cost a lot of money. Therefore, I think there is work to be done - whether by us, the Department or somebody else - to look at good models in other countries to see what works well to prevent child poverty and what is affordable for the State to do in Ireland because it is a big and incredibly complex issue.

Our main concern about child care is that it needs to include out-of-school care. A person on their own may need support for someone to mind their child before school as well as after school. People often do shift work, so how can that happen if they are parenting on their own? How can they be supported? While we welcome the new single affordable child care programme, we also have concerns about it.

Schools are an obvious facility that could be used, but at the moment there does not seem to be any lever. In fact, I am aware of after-school facilities in a number of schools which are closing because the boards of management have decided to do that. Anything the Department of Education and Skills or anyone else can do to ensure the provision of high-quality, child-centred, out-of-school care is welcome. It is needed to help lone parents to participate in society.

I will ask Ms Maher to comment on the education and employment question.

Ms Valerie Maher: Senator Ardagh said there was a high proportion of lone parents in her constituency of Dublin 12. They found that when working in minimum wage jobs, it was difficult for them to access education to allow them to increase their earning potential. It backs up our point that, particularly for someone on the minimum wage who might be accessing the family income supplement, they cannot currently access other educational supports such as the back-to-education allowance because it is not one of the qualifying payments for that scheme. Therefore, some people in minimum wage jobs are stuck there and cannot improve their earning potential because they cannot access education.

Senator Humphreys referred specifically to the ESRI report on outcomes of the back-to-education allowance. The report said that work is better at reducing poverty than for people who try to access employment after a back-to-education scheme. Since that report was written, housing costs have increased significantly. I wonder, therefore, if being in work still reduces poverty when the majority of one's wages go on housing and child care? An update on that report might be beneficial because there has been such a significant increase in housing costs.

The ability for work to reduce poverty is dependent on earnings. It would depend on how much a person is able to earn and whether work pays in that context, as well as the stability of that work and whether a person is in precarious employment.

Not all lone parents in education are in receipt of the back-to-education allowance. In particular, if they are not in receipt of rent supplement it means they can stay on their jobseeker's transition or one-parent family payment and still be in full-time education. The report does not show the full picture. That is because there may be lone parents who have access to education

and who have progressed into employment whom that report will not have captured.

I acknowledge Senator Humphreys' point, which is a fair one, that just because a report says something we do not like, it does not mean we should not take it on board and allow that to inform our policy stances and, indeed, policy responses from Government.

Deputy Brady mentioned targeted versus universal payments. I took from what the Deputy said that he supports us in that regard. It is certainly helpful for us to see some of the costings for it. The rationale for it is that, in the context of limited resources, we would like to see what resources are being targeted at the poorest children. That is why we say the qualified child increase should be targeted at the poorest families, even if it is only a short term, interim measure in the context of the recession and specifically the financial impact that reforms have had on lone parent families. Can we target the limited resources available to the Government at these families to alleviate some of the negative impacts they have suffered?

Mr. Mike Allen: I will answer some of the questions and then I will ask Ms Ann-Marie O'Reilly to talk a bit about how it looks on the front line. On the point made by the Chairman, it is a really important way of looking at the issue. Some families are one parent families from the very beginning and others arrive at it as a result of some form of crisis such as a death or relationship breakdown. It is our understanding of homelessness that these sorts of crises increase the risk of other things going wrong. In the current housing situation where housing is very hard to find, it is not surprising that families getting into these crises find themselves getting into housing problems as well and that pushes us back. What more can we do to prevent homelessness at that point? There is a clear risk for many households in which there would not have been a risk before who necessarily do not go to agencies to avoid homelessness. Focus Ireland is doing a lot of work on this. Many of the people who are currently facing homelessness would not go down to the coffee shop to look for advice because they associate it with a different type of homelessness and something that is nothing to do with them. They do not do anything until it is too late. These are really important issues that need to be explored.

The central sets of questions that were asked about rent certainty, the private rental sector and social housing are very much related to each other. From where we are sitting, they are the two solutions to the problem. In homeless organisations and organisations for people who are vulnerable in the housing market, there has always been a view that there should be more certainty about rents. That really ramped up about three or four years ago when we began to see individuals and families on rent supplement unable to pay their rent. The Department of Social Protection at the time took the view that increasing rent supplement would further push up rents. We do not think the evidence was there for that but the Department did and that was its policy. The obvious answer to the Department's concern was that we cannot just leave people out there to hang and become homeless. If that was the problem, it needed to introduce some form of rent control. We have been arguing that now for several years. It is very welcome that there is now a form of rent certainty. It is a step in the right direction but it is an unusual version of it.

To some extent, the truth will be in the telling. One can make certain observations about it, even from what we already know. It uses this idea of the pressurised areas, which is present in Scottish legislation. It has never actually been enacted in Scottish legislation and we do not know how it works. There is obviously a need to do those things quickly because, as the Deputy and Senator have said, rent is increased when people know what is coming down the track. That is the problem with that model. The other important thing to say is that 4% is a fairly substantial increase compared to any other time in our history. That should automatically

be triggering the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government to do something about rent supplement and HAP thresholds and to say they must do that. If the Department of Social Protection keeps the same position either by saying it will only increase rent supplement every three years or through some undefined policy, it will be disastrous. That should now be part of the picture.

The point of the private rental sector strategy is that all these different bits of the jigsaw need to be done together. What came out of the process is that the Minister put the various bits of the jigsaw in various different committees again. I find it very hard to see how the review group on taxation of the private rented sector can link with issues about security in the private rented sector because the whole point is the trade-off between them. The whole point is it is meant to be a strategy in which there is a trade-off between that bit and the next bit. Putting them all into different committees, which is what the Minister essentially did, is problematic. Something was lost in that which should not have been lost. The most important document on the private rented sector in the past ten years or perhaps longer was the NESC document. It has been forgotten and has not been mentioned in the strategy. If it is lost, we are lost because it is not possible to get a solution to housing without an effective private rented sector in a modern economy.

We also cannot get a solution to housing and homelessness without an effective social housing sector. I accept what Senator Humphreys said about what many councillors anecdotally said about the introduction of the policy with 50% of social housing allocations in Dublin going to homeless and other vulnerable groups and 25% in other cities. There was a lot of talk of that. The data do not support that. The number of families becoming homeless over the period of time that policy existed increased. When that policy was in place, there was no point at which it suddenly began to increase faster. When the policy was removed, it did not start to decline.

I do not dismiss anecdotal information, which needs to be borne in mind as part of the picture. However, if we end up believing that policy created homelessness, it is necessary to believe that Dublin families are uniquely inclined to respond to such incentives. There was no increase in family homelessness in Limerick even though it got a substantial increase. There was no increase in family homelessness in Cork until it was removed. A lot of work is being done on this, in particular an important study in New York, which found it had a slight pull factor of bringing families into homelessness when they had this allocation, but it was a much more effective push-out factor and it was worth taking the small pull in without the out.

The Housing Agency did draw up a report. Taking on board what the Chairman said about being careful in what I say about outside organisations - I have the utmost respect for the Housing Agency and its research function - this report is not up to standard. The only thing it mentions about this issue, about which the Senator is rightly concerned, is to state there is emerging evidence. The evidence never emerged and the emerging evidence was hearsay. The concern that the Senator and councillors had about that are legitimate and should have been addressed in a serious piece of work before the policy was changed, rather than being based on things that had been heard.

We have stated that 0.1% of the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government budget should be spent on research - of course, it is not doing it. We take the opportunity today to extend that suggestion to the Department of Social Protection.

I would like to come back and sum up, but first I ask Ms O'Reilly to speak about these experiences on the front line.

Ms Ann-Marie O'Reilly: Regarding the rent certainty measures, working on the front line I see a broad range of experiences from families coming in from the private rental sector. We welcome many of the measures introduced, which were very positive, but they were too late. By the time the amendments came in in 2015, rents were almost at the 2007 peak. By the time the increases came in in June 2016, they had surpassed the peaks we had in the boom. Unfortunately, they were just a little bit too late for those who had already entered homelessness. That resulted in huge mistrust among people in the homeless sector and huge anxiety about re-entering the private rental sector. There are no guarantees for tenants in private rented housing even with all the changes and that is because it is in a market.

I often meet families who ask me if they will be back in a hotel room in two or three years' time. I tell them about the changes and make sure they know about the legislation that was introduced and what protections are available to them. They often point out that they did everything right the previous time. They point out that the landlord could evict them if he wants to sell the house. I cannot lie to them. I point out that is a possibility, but if it happens they should contact the council or Focus Ireland to get help with that. Ultimately there are no guarantees. We will probably not see the outcome of the two-year freeze on the rent until this time next year. It has been said that many landlords front-loaded when that was about to come in.

The rental measures do not address discrimination in the market. That is something I would see from working at the front line with families, particularly one-parent families, namely, they are generally more discriminated against. Again, that is anecdotal and I do not know if there is anything out there to show it is the case. It is already hard to go to a viewing for a homeless person, for someone on a social welfare payment or for someone on a lower income, and there are certainly many families who are in some type of employment. However, those arriving as a one-parent family know they are at the end of the list and that the landlords will look at others before looking at them. Unfortunately, the measures do not address the discrimination that exists in the market.

Many of the people we work with are not aware of these changes, what they really mean for them on the ground or what they can do about them. There is an imbalance of power in a landlord-tenant relationship, no matter what one's income or background, and that imbalance is not just among people on low incomes or of lower education. Therefore, to assert their rights and to know what they can do about it can be very difficult. Threshold is available and is one of the mainstays in providing that type of service. The RTB is at the next level but many people will not go that far because they are just keen to find something and move on. Maybe they will go back to family or friends in the hope that they will get back into the rental market but, because the rental market has become very tight, unfortunately, that often does not pan out and they find themselves in homelessness. While the changes were very welcome and positive, perhaps they are a little too late. As Mr. Allen said, they were perhaps not done in a timely fashion along with many of the other measures.

Mr. Mike Allen: To sum up, while this can be a very depressing subject, rightly so, it is important to remember that the number of homeless families is not static. Focus Ireland and other organisations are supporting families out of homelessness every day, and we supported more families out of homelessness last month than we had done in any previous month, and that has been building up over time. Since the allocations of the social housing directive were removed, the shift has been very much away from social housing, the proportion of social housing exits has fallen and the number in the private rented sector has increased. Our view is that we would be now seeing a real decline in family homelessness if we had both of those tools available to

us.

In the last month, Focus Ireland supported some 45 families out of homelessness into secure housing. Half of those went to social housing, whether from approved housing bodies or local authorities, and the other half went to the private rented sector with the support of homeless HAP. One of the unremarked things about the rent certainty provision, and it is one of the positive elements in most respects, is that most proposals on rent certainty suggested that when a place becomes empty and a new tenant comes in, the landlords can just go back to the market price. They cannot do that under the current provision and that will help to keep overall rents in control, which is positive. However, it removes one of the things Ms O'Reilly was referring to, namely, under the old system, for families and households who were not seen as good tenants by landlords, we were buying them back into the market due to the fact homeless HAP can put a premium on them. It should not have to do that but it is exactly the same as we do in the labour market, where, if somebody is long-term unemployed, we give employers a subsidy to take them. In this way, we pay rents slightly above the going rate to get somebody out of homeless accommodation and back into rented accommodation. That is now closed off to us because of this measure. There may be other ways we will get around that but it is an unintended consequence of closing that off. If we could close that out, we might begin to see a significant decline in exits. That is a fear and something we need to address rather than an alarmist statement.

Deputy Bailey made a point about housing supply. All I would add is that when we do not have enough supply, there is a distributional issue as to who gets to carry the burden of this problem. At the moment we are quite clearly putting it on poor families, lone-parent families and the vulnerable - they are carrying the burden. I would warn that, given the new housing units and the approach in Rebuilding Ireland, as we have said before, there is a real fear that what is being done means a new parallel homeless service for families is being built up for the medium and long term. We do not think it is a good idea to build in special provisions for such families because it is transitional accommodation. The Irish State abolished transitional accommodation for homeless families ten years ago by consensus. If we are moving back to thinking that people must make some sort of transition from homelessness back into a home, that is a serious step backwards. Everybody who has made a mistake on family homelessness has essentially put into place systems which warehouse homeless families for long periods of time until we get the market right. Those families suffer, their children suffer and society suffers. That is one interpretation of the plan in Rebuilding Ireland. We have raised this with the Minister and the Department. There were no further discussions. There needs to be a specific sub-strategy on homeless families, including lone parent families, to elaborate the complexity of that issue. This is not directly the area of concern and is more about social protection, but it is really important we say that. Otherwise, in the future the Department of Social Protection and this committee will be dealing with the social legacies of our failure to deal with these problems at this point.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I have two quick questions. I hear constantly that it is not worth while for a couple to stay together and that a lone parent is financially better off. Are there financial gains in going from partnership to lone parenthood? I am dealing with this. This would be said to me every week. I am asking this of One Family. Ms Kiernan and Ms Maher probably have much more experience in this area than I have. What is the answer? It is a little like the old story when we were dealing with immigrants where it was claimed they left the pram at the bus stop and got another pram. That could always be broken down by saying it was absolutely wrong and giving the facts. How does one deal with a comment, which might be getting ingrained in a couple's minds, to the effect that they would be financially better off apart

whereas they would not be? What is the response to that?

On the unintended consequences, I agree strongly with Mr. Allen that we need that level of research because that is the only way we can identify the unintended consequences. I was not aware of the narrow aspect to which Mr. Allen referred but it would indicate that my experience is correct because that is how it works in communities. It is a very small level. I see homeless people allocated accommodation in flat complexes. Everybody who got accommodation during the emergency was nearly homeless, but it then became folklore that the only way a person could get a flat was if he or she left his or her mother or if he or she went homeless.

My experience with the private rental sector is that we have been able to deal with the increases in rent, especially if a person has been on rent allowance because he or she has been able to go back and try to get it dealt with one to one. Where we have had little success is in cases where the accommodation has been sold. That has been the real driver of homelessness. My hobby horse is Airbnb, especially within the Dublin area. I looked through my e-mails before the meeting started and came across an e-mail from a landlord who has just bought an apartment asking me about the regulations relating to Airbnb. I answered him quickly asking whether the apartment had been let originally and he responded that it had been let before he purchased it. While I accept this is a Dublin region issue, the majority of the homelessness problem is in Dublin and one of the key drivers in losing supply within the Dublin area is Airbnb. It is a choice if we are trying to deal with the supply issue. Do we supply the tourist market that has a negative financial impact or do we supply housing for the homeless? I say we supply housing for the homeless and deal with the lack of hotel bedrooms in a different manner.

I would like to hear a little more on the Dublin 15 experiment. Communicating information is vital to starting to deal with problems and I would ask the witnesses to expand a little on the Dublin 15 experiment.

Chairman: Who wants to start with those?

Ms Karen Kiernan: I will answer the Senator's query as to whether it is financially beneficial for families to separate. In One Family we are extremely clear that there are significant costs, as I mentioned, when a family or parent separates. One is considering two dwellings, two family homes, ideally, where children can spend time with each parent, although this is generally not available. One is considering the costs and the legal and emotional supports required to go through a separation. There may be some very specific circumstances in which both parents are reliant on social welfare and perhaps have other places where they can live so that they are not looking for rent supplement or social housing and each qualifies for a full social welfare payment. I suggest that these cases are in the minority and that where people are reliant on accommodation being supplemented by the State, it will be extraordinarily difficult. We would be more than happy to chat on our helpline to the people to whom Senator Humphreys refers and help them think through the reality of what they propose. I would find it disappointing to think that any parent would be that cynical because that is not our experience. People experience huge levels of trauma when they separate. They do not do so lightly. In fact, they frequently need to live together for long periods because they cannot afford to separate, which puts huge pressure on their families and children.

Mr. Mike Allen: Perhaps Ms Connolly will-----

Ms Alison Connolly: I will talk about the Dublin 15 campaign we ran. It was based on research we conducted last year into family homelessness. We found that a slightly higher pro-

portion of a cohort of 636 children we were considering had previously been residing in Dublin 15. Based on our knowledge of prevention campaigns in other jurisdictions, we know targeted prevention campaigns are the most effective, so we decided to run a very targeted, short-run prevention campaign in Dublin 15.

There were two main aspects to it. One aspect was large-scale posterage in bus shelters, train stations and the Blanchardstown shopping centre. The other aspect, and the one that was most effective, was sending out very specifically worded letters to families in receipt of rent supplement in the area. We were lucky that the local Department of Social Protection worked with us on this. We sent about 2,500 letters, and nearly 200 people contacted us. We had a specific freefone line and ran one-to-one clinics in the area. The campaign lasted about five weeks. About 180 people contacted us.

It was very successful targeting in that of the people who contacted us, I think seven did not need assistance, so we got people who did need help and were at risk of homelessness. We also got people whom we could help. There were issues with which we could assist them, whether it was through our own advice and advocacy work or through moving them on to Threshold or other organisations. We also found that 98% of them said the letter was the reason they contacted us, as opposed to the posterage campaign. Implicitly, people could have seen the poster campaign and it could have triggered something, but the letter was the more successful aspect. We managed to move about 10% of the people who contacted us and who were at risk of homelessness into more stable accommodation as a result. Some of them did move into emergency accommodation by virtue of the fact that they had received valid notices of termination and we just got to them too late. It is worth considering how early one can prompt people to get in contact, but it was a very successful campaign overall, and the vast majority of people were very satisfied with the service and would refer others to it, so we are really happy with it.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: What was the cost of financing the campaigns?

Mr. Mike Allen: The theoretical spend on the advertising campaign was about €50,000. The real spend, since we got various people to support us, was about €10,000. We paid the Department of Social Protection to send the letters out. I cannot remember what the----

Ms Alison Connolly: I think the letter campaign cost a couple of grand. It was not a huge sum. Therefore, the cheapest thing we did was the most effective. They were Focus Ireland-branded letters. It was not Department of Social Protection letters that were sent out. Decisions were made in that regard. Staff costs accounted for the rest.

Mr. Mike Allen: The crucial aspect was the co-operation with the Department of Social Protection. We are writing up a report on the campaign, and I think the Department is very interested in the outcome of it. Our argument is that this shows this sort of targeted writing in this way is effective. The Department's fear previously was always that if people got letters from the Department of Social Protection, they would frighten them and those people would put them in the bin. However, the model of the Department sending out the letter, which avoids any information protection issues, but with the letter having a letterhead reading "Focus Ireland", seemed to be able to get through to people one would otherwise not have got through to. Bord Gáis Energy, which is one of our sponsors, provided the funding for it.

Senator Humphreys also spoke about Airbnb. I agree it is a real threat. While hotels, B&Bs and others who provide accommodation are necessarily regulated, this sector is being allowed to develop unregulated, which, I imagine, is causing problems. The Minister has said that he is

going to act on the matter. The sooner he does so, the better because with each private rented accommodation we lose, the problem increases. The Senator also spoke about evictions. We see eviction as a significant cause of homelessness. We do not have hard evidence for this but the sense from our front-line services is that, primarily, landlords are selling up because of pressure from their lenders, be they vulture funds or banks. In other words, some evictions occur because of house repossession by banks and others-----

Ms Alison Connolly: They are bank encouraged sales.

Mr. Mike Allen: The banks have the right to sell up and to evict. We have argued - this applies in Northern Ireland and in other jurisdictions - that in the case of a property bought as a buy-to-let property, in respect of many of which tax relief was in the past obtained from the State, the players are not only the lender and the landlord, but the State, the public interest and the tenant and that as such it is entirely legitimate to provide that just because a property is being sold that it is not a reason to terminate an existing tenant. The tenancy should continue in the same way as it does in commercial property. Currently, we provide families with less protection than we do businesses. The aforementioned proposal was put, by way of amendment, to the Bill but the then Government parties voted it down, the reason for which I do not know. There might be good reasons as to why they did so but they were not explained to us. It is very hard to find proposals that will make a difference in this area. There are probably only three or four such proposals, one of which I have just outlined. If there are good reasons, which we are unaware of, why this cannot be done we ask that people be, at least, made aware of that.

Chairman: I thank Ms Kiernan, Ms Maher, Ms Connolly, Ms O'Reilly and Mr. Allen for attending this meeting and for their positive engagement on and responses to the matters raised, which were informative and appreciated by the committee. This module of our work is near completion. We will suspend for a few minutes to allow the Department officials to take their seats.

Sitting suspended at 12.53 p.m. and resumed at 12.57 p.m.

Chairman: I welcome Ms Simonetta Ryan, Mr. Niall Egan, Ms Erika Klein and Ms Fiona Ward from the Department of Social Protection. As they will appreciate, the committee is nearing conclusion of its piece of work on lone parents. The Department officials, as the opening witnesses, set out the issue for committee members. The committee then heard submissions from a number of other witnesses. Before we commence work on the drafting of our report, members would like to put some questions to the officials based on what those witnesses had to say.

I will first put my questions to the officials, following which I will then allow questions from members. I understand the Department is to undertake a review of the lone-parent issue. Perhaps the officials would set out what format that review will take, the timeframe for the review and whether it will be a quantitative review or if qualitative measures are also being reviewed. As the committee would like to support rather than duplicate the work of the Department, perhaps the officials would provide some insight into its work in that regard.

Ms Simonetta Ryan: I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to re-engage with the committee because a number of things have happened since we first appeared before it. I am Simonetta Ryan, assistant secretary at the Department of Social Protection, and I am joined today by my colleagues, Mr. Niall Egan, principal officer of working age and child income policy, Mr. Erika Klein, assistant principal officer of working age and child income policy, and Ms Fiona

Ward, divisional manager of the Dublin south division. In the course of my statement I will touch on the review that commenced last October, which is when we first appeared before the committee. I will also update the committee on a number of other things that have happened in the interim.

My opening statement today is an update for the committee on progress made with some of the issues raised previously and the changes that have occurred affecting lone parents since our last appearance. At that time we discussed the significant reforms to the one-parent family payment which have been under way since budget 2011 and have seen the age of the youngest child for receipt of the payment gradually reduce to seven years of age. The committee has met several times since our appearance last October and has spoken to a variety of representative bodies in the intervening period. I stated at our last appearance that it will take several years before the full impact of the reforms can be assessed. That has been borne out by a number of comments since and also comments I heard today. This is due to the fact that lone parents, on foot of the reforms, will take up education, training or employment support programmes which will take time for them to complete.

The Department has begun engaging, on a proactive and supported basis, with lone parents whose youngest child is seven years or older. To date, more than 9,000 lone parents of the 14,500 lone parents who are on the jobseeker's transitional payment have been selected for activation. This is double the number of lone parents who were selected for activation by October 2016. It is the first time the Department has actively engaged with lone parents on this scale with a view to improving their circumstances through access to education, training and employment supports. This is a very significant step forward, which it is hoped is acknowledged by everybody, in addressing the poverty rates for these families. More than 6,000 of those 9,000 lone parents are in the activation phase, which means that they have already been selected for activation and have been case managed, are scheduled for an engagement or are awaiting an appointment time. The remaining 3,000 individuals have been fully case managed, which means they have met a case officer, have agreed a personal plan and are progressing with this plan, which includes moving into education and training on foot of their engagement.

Since our last appearance, the Department has continued to meet lone parent representative groups in a number of different fora. One of the issues raised with us related to training supports for lone parents. Some of the lone parent representative groups raised a concern with the Department about lone parents participating in education and training board, ETB, or vocational training opportunities scheme, VTOS, courses who were in receipt of the jobseeker's transitional payment. Once these individuals commenced on these courses, they were transferred to a training allowance administered by the Department of Education and Skills. The potential difficulty highlighted to us was that the rules for payment of the VTOS or ETB allowance were related to attendance at the course. This could have resulted in a reduced payment for a lone parent where he or she could not always attend perhaps due to the ill health of their child or other unexpected circumstances. The Department reviewed this situation internally and with the Department of Education and Skills. On 16 November 2016, an instruction was issued to all Intreo offices to continue payment of the jobseeker's transitional payment to lone parents undertaking such courses rather than moving them to a training allowance.

At our last appearance, my colleague, Fiona Ward, provided the committee with an update on the engagements with lone parents in her division, which includes Tallaght, including some of the customised training that had been organised. These engagements have continued, with some very positive results. For example, the Department's case officers liaised with Tallaght

ETB which then developed a programme, called Pre-Employment (Return to Work), specifically tailored to lone parents on the jobseeker's transitional payment. The course ran from October to December 2016 with 16 participants, two of whom secured employment and many of whom now wish to progress to other courses and employment. This course will run again from February this year. Invitations also issued to lone parents for events targeted to their needs such as a jobs week "Transitioning Back to the Workforce" information morning. Ms Ward will be happy to provide the committee with more detail on this item today.

As the committee is aware, the Department of Education and Skills is taking the lead on a programme for Government commitment to carry out independent research on the barriers to third level education for lone parents. The Department of Education and Skills selected researchers from NUI Maynooth to carry out this work. Our Department has been consulted along with officials from that Department and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs by the researchers from NUI Maynooth. A draft report was received and considered in late September 2016. The Department of Education and Skills accepted at that stage that the timeframe was extremely tight for delivery of the report and that, with more time, the output would be more worthwhile. A second draft was circulated by the Department of Education and Skills late last week and we will be reviewing that as soon as feasible. I assure the committee that while the report was not completed within the planned timeframe, it was sufficiently progressed during 2016 to help inform relevant budget 2017 discussions.

Budget 2017 continues to build on the improvements that were implemented for lone parents in budgets 2015 and 2016 and will result in further increases in overall income for lone parents. The measures that benefit lone parents include a €5 increase in the one-parent family payment, jobseeker's transitional payment, jobseeker's allowance and the back to education allowance with effect from March 2017. The budget also includes a new €500 per annum cost-of-education allowance for parents, including lone parents, in receipt of the back to education allowance. The income disregard for parents receiving the one-parent family payment and the jobseeker's transitional payment was increased by €20 per week from €90 to €110 with effect from 5 January 2017, while a Christmas bonus of 85% was paid in early December. Furthermore, the national minimum wage has increased to €9.25 an hour and this may benefit some lone parents working outside the home.

The increase in the one-parent family payment and jobseeker's transitional payment income disregards that took effect from 5 January will benefit approximately 17,500 lone parents. On foot of the measures for lone parents contained in budget 2017, a lone parent on the jobseeker's transitional payment working 15 hours at the national minimum wage will see an increase in his or her overall income of almost €15 per week or €780 per annum, from approximately €332 in 2016 to €347 in 2017. This is as a result of the increase in the national minimum wage, the increase in the income disregard for this payment and the rate increase of €5 per week. Since 2015, this lone parent will have seen an increase of almost €43 per week or over €2,200 per annum between take home pay and State support. A lone parent on the one-parent family payment working 15 hours at the national minimum wage will see an increase in his or her overall income of almost €16 per week or over €830 per annum, from approximately €338 in 2016 to €354 in 2017. This is as a result of the increase in the national minimum wage, the increase in the income disregard for this payment and the rate increase of €5 per week.

A social impact assessment using the ESRI's simulating welfare and income tax changes, SWITCH, model on a non-indexed basis of the social welfare budget package finds that people who are in the lower-income quintile gain the most from budget 2017 measures. This includes

lone parents. The ESRI recognises explicitly that this was as a result of the inclusion of the weekly rate increase for working-age rates of payment. In the case of lone parents, the Department's social impact assessment of the impact of budget 2017 shows an increase of 1.2% for working lone parents and 4.5% for those who are not working. This represents a cumulative increase across budgets 2015, 2016 and 2017 of 4% for working lone parents and 6.9% for lone parents who are not working, which is substantially above the cumulative gain for average households of 3.3%. This shows definite progress with the commitment to reducing poverty for lone parents and their families.

The single affordable child care scheme being provided by the Government will also significantly improve the provision and cost of child care for lone parents and is a step-change in State support for child care in Ireland. This will assist lone parents in low-income employment. The Department is contributing to the work under way in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on this new scheme.

Separate to the specific measures introduced in the budget, the committee will be aware that as part of the debate on the Social Welfare Bill 2016, the Minister for Social Protection agreed to undertake a number of different reports across a range of areas. The Minister agreed that the Department would commission an independent report on the one-parent family payment reforms and this commitment was included in the Act. The report is to examine the financial and social effects of the amendments to the scheme made since 1 January 2012, taking into account the poverty rates and welfare dependency of those impacted by the reforms. The Minister committed to producing the report as quickly as possible and no later than August 2017, as it will be required to feed into the budget 2018 discussions.

The Department has since prioritised this work within the one-parent family payment policy unit. A request for tender, RFT, is being issued with the relevant procurement rules, procedures and timeframes that apply. The Department has been in discussions with the Office of Government Procurement, OGP, to determine if the request for tender can be issued within one of its existing frameworks. If this is possible, it would be the most efficient and effective way of procuring the required review. The OGP advised that the best approach is to issue an outline of the RFT to potential providers engaged under their framework seeking expressions of interest. The Department supplied the necessary outline to the Office of Government Procurement on 19 December 2016 and the request for expressions of interest issued from the OGP on 20 December 2016, with a closing date of 11 January 2017.

The Department will consult the Office of Government Procurement in the coming days on the results of this process and the next steps. Any procurement process is time consuming and must adhere to the relevant procurement rules with regard to the process, timelines and evaluation of proposals. The timeframe for this report is, therefore, ambitious. However, the Department is making every effort to progress this as quickly as possible while adhering to the rules.

Mr. Egan may wish to comment on the structure of the review or the initial question put to me.

Mr. Niall Egan: As Ms Ryan outlined, the initial process concluded yesterday, 11 January, when we received initial feedback from the Office of Government Procurement. There are perhaps eight different interested parties and I understand this is in lot 1 of the OGP framework.

Ms Simonetta Ryan: We cannot discuss the request for tender because I do not wish to compromise the process in any way. I ask Mr. Egan to focus on the qualitative and quantitative

aspects.

Mr. Niall Egan: The next step is to draft the request for tender. Given the issues that were raised by the select committee on Committee Stage of the budget legislation, we would expect the RFT to address quantitative and qualitative aspects as it must examine financial and societal changes, as well as issues related to poverty and welfare dependency. It strikes us, therefore, that it would be pertinent to consider both issues. Given the timeframe involved, it will be an ambitious tender if it is to be delivered within the timeframe. Nevertheless, we are committed to doing our utmost to deliver it.

Ms Simonetta Ryan: The Department is continuing to work on all items related to lone parents. From what I have said and from the comments I have heard, there is ongoing engagement and review. Changes to various elements of the process have been taking place continuously since the reforms began, including since our previous meeting with the committee. I thank the members for their time and I and my colleagues will be pleased to answer any questions they may have.

Chairman: I thank the departmental officials for their attendance and for providing an updated report. While it is only a few months since they last appeared, we have moved on a great deal in the meantime. I have a specific request. I presume when the tendering process has successfully concluded that a document will be produced specifying the work of the tender, in other words, the procedure to be followed and so forth. If that is the case, I presume this document will be made public. Can it be made it available to the joint committee at that stage?

Ms Simonetta Ryan: Whenever we have anything that may be made public under the tendering procedures, we will have no problem sharing it with the committee.

Chairman: The committee has a specific interest in this work because the Department will have an independent entity doing research on the matter. The committee would like to see this to help us conclude our work. We would like to see the parallels but we are not looking for the outcome. I fully accept that the Department is precluded from providing details until the tender process is complete.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the officials for giving their time again. I will briefly address the report because it is the outcome of an amendment I tabled to the Bill, one which, thankfully, the Minister supported. This work to identify the precise impact is critical and badly needed. Arising from visits to our clinics and so on, members have anecdotal evidence of the impact the changes have had on individuals and families. This will put all of those issues to the fore.

I welcome the fact that it is now in process. Yesterday was the closing date. I also welcome the fact that eight parties have come forward and expressed an interest in it. I am interested in the next stage because the Minister gave a commitment that this would be published in time to feed in to the budgetary discussions for next year's budget. I believe a date in August has been mentioned. It is critical that this date is adhered to. I do not want this to be just another report gathering dust on a shelf. It needs to be a report with actions coming out from it and specifically feeding into the budget. While the crux of the report is the focus on the issues stemming from the changes going back to 2012, I would be interested to find out more. This morning the committee heard a very good contribution from Focus Ireland which gave us all the facts and figures with regard to lone parents. The figures show that 65% of homeless families are one-parent families. This area needs to be looked at in relation to this report. I believe the changes that have been made to the single parent payment have had a direct impact on homelessness for lone

parents also. This critical part of the report needs to be looked at and fed back to the committee.

The witnesses say that over the coming days the Department will be speaking to the Office of Government Procurement. Is that by the end of this week or next week? It is crucial that this does roll out as fast as possible to hit the deadline of August in order to inform the budget discussion. It is an ambitious deadline and this was alluded to in the Department representative's contribution today. Perhaps the committee could hear a little bit more about this. I also want to touch on the matter of the long awaited report on the barriers to third level education for lone parents. It is long overdue. The Department acknowledges that it received the first draft in September last year. It has now gone out for a second drafting I believe. Will the witnesses indicate when we can expect to see that report? It is long overdue and badly needed.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: The report is important, especially regarding lone parents. I got into politics in 1999 in local government. I went through what was supposed to have been the prosperous noughties where everybody was seeing the benefit of the Celtic tiger. It made no difference, however, to many people in Dublin's inner city because they never got employment. I remember carrying out a survey where we saw 54% unemployment when nationally the unemployment figures were down to 4% and 5%. There was a cohort that never saw the Celtic tiger. Now, as we are coming out of recession we are seeing very progressive numbers around unemployment. We need - I see it happening in the Department - that targeted approach to make sure people get into employment and are not left sitting on the shelf. Money and benefits might be thrown at them but they are left unemployed and not sharing in the recovery.

This is critical. It is why the Intreo offices and other measures happening within the Department of Social Protection are key to ensure the targeting. In many cases people are resistant because they have been unemployed for so long and they fear engagement in this regard. It may be a lone parent or somebody who is coming out of an intergenerational home that has not seen employment. Their parents had not worked and sometimes their grandparents had not worked. This happened in the Dublin Docklands area when people lost their traditional dockside work due to containerisation. There is multigenerational unemployment. There needs to be a target and a review to make sure we have the outcomes we want to achieve. That is where research is vital.

Chairman: Deputy John Brady made a point about the report on barriers to entry to third level education for lone parents. The programme for Government committed to publishing the report before the budget was announced. The departmental officials reiterated a line from the Minister for Education and Skills, that there was a draft and that it would have influenced the budgetary process. They are now saying there is a second draft. We are well past September when it was probably expected the report would be published. With the extended time, are there substantial changes between the two drafts or what led to the significant increase in time?

Deputy Denise Mitchell: One Family spoke about the transition from welfare to work being complex and cutting across all Departments. Will the officials tell us briefly what interaction has taken place across Departments on lone parents? The report is needed as soon as possible. The officials said it had helped to inform the relevant discussions on budget 2017. Is there anything they can pinpoint in the budget where the measures were taken into account? They mentioned that 9,000 lone parents had been selected for activation. What are the schemes involved? Are the majority being steered towards JobPath?

Ms Simonetta Ryan: I will ask Ms Ward, a divisional officer in Tallaght, to talk about what is happening there in the activation of lone parents and the figure of 9,000 to which the Deputy

referred. I emphasise that the issue of homelessness is not within my area. It is a much bigger issue. Senator Kevin Humphreys mentioned the targeted approach which we will pick up in our comments.

Ms Fiona Ward: Our engagement with jobseeker transition clients is focused on steering them towards education and training opportunities. They do not have to look for employment until their youngest child is 14 years old. We have been engaging with them to see if they need additional skills to assist them in finding secure sustainable employment.

The Department has an agreement with the education and training boards, with which we work very closely not only for jobseeker transition customers but for all customers in developing targeted training programmes. In Tallaght, for example, there were 723 jobseeker transition clients who moved from the one-parent family payment. Our office was the biggest in the country at the time. We have engaged with all such clients, of whom 573 have been brought to information sessions during which people involved in the education and training boards, jobs clubs and community employment schemes, as well as our own case officer, made presentations on the supports and services available to them. The education and training boards offer several part-time evening programmes to which our clients are referred and which they have taken up. Community employment schemes are suitable for many of our jobseeker transition clients because their youngest child is in school and they can do the required 19.5 hours. Jobs clubs give clients the interview and career guidance skills they need to secure employment.

In Tallaght, we worked with the education and training board to develop a pre-employment return to work programme targeted at our clients in both the Tallaght and Clondalkin areas. Senator Humphreys referred to the challenges of dealing with people who are not used to engaging with us in this way. We were able to run that programme for the Tallaght office but not for the Clondalkin office as we did not get enough interest at the time, but we hope to run it in February. We ran the Tallaght programme in term time, starting in September and beginning each day at 9.30 a.m., after the school day started. Of the 16 people who started the programme, 14 completed it, two of whom have since secured employment. Some of the participants have applied for night training courses with the ETB while others are seeking part-time training options. The feedback from the programme was very positive, with participants saying it gave them great confidence. They now have a CV and are more knowledgeable and confident about applying for jobs. It was a taster programme and participants found the IT module, career planning aspect and work experience component particularly useful. The members of that first group have set up a network to remain in touch and encourage each other in their training and job-seeking efforts. It was a very positive outcome from our perspective and we hope to run the programme again in January. We expect to get the numbers from the Clondalkin office to run it there as well.

There are financial supports available for lone parents who take up employment, including family income supplement and the back to work family dividend. As I said, jobseeker transition clients do not have to look for work and are not, therefore, referred to JobPath. Our focus is not so much on securing work for our clients. The emphasis is on providing education and training opportunities in order that when they can take up full-time employment, they are as near as possible to workforce-ready.

Senator Humphreys referred to the situation of families who become homeless. Within our three divisions in Dublin, we have an agreement in place that if a lone parent or any family member who is in receipt of a payment from one of our offices becomes homeless, he or she will remain within the remit of that office. In other words, people will continue to draw their

payment from the same office even though they may be placed in a hotel in a different location. Doing it this way allows clients to continue to access the activation process and avoid disruption to their payment. If they need assistance in taking their children to school, for example, our community welfare service can make payments by way of the supplementary welfare allowance under the emergency needs programme.

Ms Simonetta Ryan: To clarify, the figure we gave for the number of responses to the expression of interest should be treated as tentative. We do not yet have a confirmed figure in that regard.

One of the issues that was highlighted in the first version of the Maynooth report was the cost of education allowance. The budget announcement of a €500 per annum increase in that allowance is one aspect of the work that is being done to assist people back to education. When representatives of the Department of Education and Skills met the Maynooth university people to discuss the first version of the report, there was agreement that there needed to be more in-depth analysis, including around the profiling of lone parents. There was a great deal of work to be done in the education space. Quite a lot of additional work has been done by Maynooth, and that is why it has taken the extra time. While I have the report, I have to be honest and say I have not had time to go through it because we are focusing on getting the request for tender, RFT, moving ahead on the study and any other material the committee needs for today's meeting. There is a lot going on in my area. I know that getting that report finished is a priority of the Department of Education and Skills and I do not see it taking much longer. I imagine it will then have to go to Government, the Ministers and so on but it is very well advanced at this stage.

Deputy Brady asked if our own report would cover the issue of homelessness. Realistically, it will not be able to cover the issue of homelessness because that is such a big issue it almost needs a separate piece of research. Our report will also have to be done in a challenging timeframe and the issues it will cover are fairly broad, so I do not see it covering that issue.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Regarding the report, what input did the Department have in terms of the budget?

Ms Simonetta Ryan: That is the cost of education allowance. That was the first piece done in response to that. Did we miss something else?

Mr. Niall Egan: On Deputy Mitchell's question about transfers from welfare to work, we have worked very closely with other Departments before the lone parent reforms and subsequently since. Of the two Departments we work closely with, the first is the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Several years ago it implemented an after-school child care scheme. In terms of the learning from that, as we were also members of the interdepartmental group on child care we were able to feed in strongly the need for lone parents and child care provision, which is fed directly into the design of the single affordable child care scheme the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is in the process of designing. As Ms Ryan referred to in her opening statement, we are also involved in that process.

The other big Department we are involved with, and which was mentioned earlier, is the Department of Education and Skills. In terms of the study that has been referred to, but also our interactions, again referenced in the opening statement, with the further education sector, we continue paying allowances to jobseeker's transition so we have dealt with the issue that emerged on foot of one of the issues raised by some of the lone parent groups. That is because of the relationship we have with the Department of Education and Skills.

The Chairman referred, anecdotally, to the increase in the number of FIS recipients. There has been an increase in the number of FIS recipients on foot of the lone parent reforms. It ties in with Senator Humphreys's point about sharing the recovery. We have noticed it across all our schemes. We are all aware of the reduction in unemployment levels, which are at 7.2%. That is very welcome but, anecdotally, we have the QNHS data. We have also seen a very significant increase in employment for lone parents in the year following the lone parent reforms. For lone parents it is about a 3.6% increase in employment, which is about four times the increase compared to all parents. We believe that is significant but for lone parents whose youngest child is aged between six and 11, which is pertinent, the increase was 7.5%. That is something we want to explore in the context of the review because that is wider than just social welfare recipients. We acknowledge that, but it is of importance.

Some of the measures we have introduced over the last three budgets have facilitated an increase in lone parents in work. Over €100 million has been allocated specifically for the benefit of lone parents on foot of measures we have introduced over the last three budgets. That is everything from the rate increase, the increase in disregards, the Christmas bonus, the fuel allowance, the increase in FIS, and the cost of education allowance which has been referred to already.

Chairman: I ask Deputy Brady to be very brief.

Deputy John Brady: As for the report on the barriers to accessing higher education for lone parents, there is much focus on this new measure, which is described as the cost of education allowance. That was cut in 2013. It is really only reinstating or reintroducing that and increasing it by €200. I think it was €300 at that stage. On listening to the witnesses, that may have been one key recommendation from that report, which we have not seen but which the officials have seen. It has gone back to a second draft. This report, when we eventually get it, may well be out of date if some of the key measures - that clearly was one of the key measures - are to reintroduce a cut that was made in 2013. The fear is that when we get this substantial long-awaited report that was committed to in the programme for Government, it will be out of date. I reiterate how important it is to get that as quickly as possible.

Chairman: I am not disagreeing with Deputy Brady but the Department of Education and Skills is the lead Department in preparation. In fairness, these officials do not have control of that situation. I am not here to defend them, but it is the Department of Education and Skills.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I have a quick question. Can the Department harvest the information on intergenerational unemployment to assist and target in particular those who have such intergenerational problems? Is there a mechanism in the Department's IT database to harvest that information in order that we can see a trend of one generation after the other?

Mr. Niall Egan: We usually collect the information on an individual basis. We genuinely struggle with householding issues and that specific issue is difficult for us to identify. Colleagues in the activation policy side are looking at it in the context of the commitment in the programme for Government to provide an action plan for jobless households. We will be exploring it in that context. At present, it is a struggle but we are looking at it. That is the best I can say.

Chairman: I thank Ms Ryan, Ms Klein, Ms Ward and Mr. Egan for their attendance today and their update on this issue. Finally, as the review is under way, they might keep this committee informed. When somebody is appointed in respect of the tender, I would appreciate it were

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the structure of the review to be made known to the committee.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.38 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Thursday, 26 January 2017.