



HELLO READERS!

Welcome to the first edition of OPEN+, which will focus on the big picture issues facing one-parent families in the 21st century.

Published to complement our members' magazine B•OPEN, and building on the work of our member groups nationwide (who currently support 10,000-15,000 one-parent families), OPEN+ aims to highlight the policy developments, challenges and opportunities for one-parent families in Ireland today. It also looks at the solutions OPEN has developed in response and will include relevant work from other actors and sectors.

Now constituting 18% of all families in Ireland, almost 1 in 3 (27%) of whom live in consistent poverty, one-parent families are an increasingly mainstream concern. We hope that OPEN+ will be a resource to all those concerned with policy and provision for these families.

With support from the Combat Poverty Agency, **OPEN has commenced a research project on the experiences and needs of one-parent families who are members of ethnic minority groups** – a first in the Irish context. As part of this work, OPEN will investigate the feasibility of establishing a major policy programme in this area, informing both our development and policy work.

OPEN has always had a pro-active policy programme, covering the key areas affecting one-parent families, previous work has been in the areas of income adequacy, child poverty and financial exclusion, as well as making work pay and addressing poverty traps.

A chief focus during the past year has been the government proposals to support lone parents which were published last year. While we are supportive of any developments which will reduce poverty for one-parent families, we continue to have some concerns in a number of important areas. Building upon work with our member groups, in this issue we analyse these proposals and make recommendations focused on effectively addressing poverty for one-parent families.

Also with support from the Combat Poverty Agency, through its Building Healthy Communities programme, **OPEN is undertaking a three year project on lone parents and mental health.** The results of the first year of this research - the first of its kind in the Republic of Ireland - show that isolation and stigmatisation continue to be factors associated with poor mental well-being amongst one-parent families.

Future editions of OPEN+ will highlight the vital supports OPEN provides for parents, children and young people in one-parent families through innovative programmes such as *Strengthening Families*, *Strengthening Communities* and *Happy Days*. More information on these and other areas of OPEN's work are available on www.oneparent.ie or by contacting us directly. We hope that you find OPEN+ informative and stimulating and, as always, we welcome any comments or feedback.

Frances Byrne
Frances Byrne
Chief Executive, OPEN

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OPEN+
ISSN: 1649-9867
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OPEN+ has an editorial board, currently composed of:
Nora Lucey, Head of Communications and Fundraising;
Camille Loftus, Head of Policy and Research; and Jane
Beatty, Information Co-ordinator.

Your opinion and response is welcome, please address to
Camille Loftus at:

OPEN
7 Red Cow Lane
Smithfield
Dublin 7
Ireland
Tel 01 8148860
enquiries@oneparent.ie
www.oneparent.ie

What are the critical issues facing lone parents from ethnic minority communities living in Ireland? A new study led by OPEN aims to identify the perspectives, barriers and issues experienced and also propose solutions that will respond to their specific needs

Lone parents from ethnic minority communities: exploring needs and responses

INTRODUCTION

OPEN, the national network of lone parent support groups, represents the diversity of interests of lone parents, particularly those living in, or at risk of poverty, and promotes their inclusion and progression within society. Respect, inclusion and participation are core values for OPEN, and we strive to ensure that every aspect of our work is guided by those principles.

OPEN's Strategic Plan builds on consultations with our member groups, and guides our work. Our current plan identifies three priority areas in which we have established Pro-active Policy Programmes: Housing and Accommodation, Income Adequacy and Childcare. Our plan also identified some key areas in which the feasibility of developing a policy programme needed to be explored; one of these areas was ethnic minorities.

Representing the interests of the diversity of lone parents requires us to take specific account of the needs and experiences of lone parents from ethnic minority communities, particularly as Ireland's ethnic diversity has increased over recent years. As a network, we are keenly aware that lone parents from an ethnic minority background have their own unique experience, and that it is vital that this experience is not only addressed within OPEN's work, but that opportunities to learn from each other are maximised.

OPEN is aware that critical and pressing issues have emerged for lone parents from ethnic minority communities living in Ireland today, and these need to be properly identified and addressed. It is important too to remember that, while the diversity of our population has increased in recent years with

the arrival of new communities, some ethnic minority communities have a long established history in Ireland.

OPEN has been successful in securing some funding for this work from the Combat Poverty Agency, under the Poverty Research Initiative and is therefore now in a position to begin working with relevant organisations. We will undertake research to investigate the feasibility of establishing a pro-active policy programme in relation to lone parents from ethnic minority groups. This work will also help ensure that OPEN's work is fully inclusive and responsive to the needs of all one-parent families.

The overall purpose of this work is to:

- Develop an understanding of the specific issues facing lone parents from ethnic minority groups
- Develop appropriate responses to the needs of ethnic minority groups who are parenting alone
- Inform OPEN's policy and practice, to ensure inclusion of ethnic minority experiences within our work
- Develop collaborative approaches with partner organisations to address the specific needs of lone parents in ethnic minority communities.

There is a dearth of research on the particular experience of lone parents from ethnic minority communities, in both an Irish and international context. This study will be the first of its kind in Ireland.

INITIAL STEPS: WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

To inform the approach to the research, and build up working partnerships to conduct it, OPEN consulted with a range of stakeholders. Prior to developing the research proposal they examined the best approach to designing the study. Those consulted included:

- AkiDwA – the national network of African women living in Ireland
- CADIC (Coalition Against the Deportation of Irish Children)
- CÁIRDE – an NGO working to reduce health inequalities among ethnic minorities
- Integrating Ireland
- Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
- Clondalkin Travellers Development Group
- Galway Refugee Support Group
- National Traveller Women's Forum
- National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism
- Refugee Information Service
- Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

These consultations identified a number of factors that will inform the research methodology.

A key issue was the need to locate the research within the context of racism and immigration issues – all groups stressed that the experience of lone parents from ethnic minority communities could only be properly understood in this context. Related to this issue was the need to work in partnership and collaboration with organisations of ethnic minority groups, who engage with the issues of migration and racism. A collaborative approach would ensure support for the study and assist in achieving the best possible outcomes from the work.

One way of working collaboratively, suggested in the consultations, was engaging with ethnic minority groups to undertake some of the research work. This would help increase participation, ensure that issues were properly captured during the research process, and would also help to support the development of ethnic minority representative groups, many of which remain at a developmental stage in Ireland. Taking such an approach, and recognising that the research would engage with participants who do not speak English as a first language, the importance of using accessible language was stressed.

Finally, the importance of ensuring that statutory bodies are appraised of the study was stressed, as it was felt that they would therefore be more likely to engage with the recommendations emerging from the research.

ETHNICITY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF RACISM IN IRELAND

While OPEN has an established track record in relation to issues associated with parenting alone, it is important to note that this study will be located within the context of existing research on gender, ethnicity, racism, and migration. Drawing on the experience of ethnic minority groups, the research will seek to ensure that both individual and institutional racism, and the impact that racism has, informs responses to issues affecting lone parents from ethnic minority communities in Ireland. The study will explore the impact of racism on those from ethnic minority communities who are parenting alone and how this manifests itself. In this context, the experience of the Traveller community will be of particular value in informing the approach, strategies and policies to be adopted in exploring and addressing the dimension of racism experienced by lone parents from ethnic minorities.

The research will also seek to explore if, and how, attitudes and values around parenting alone differ among ethnic minority communities, and examine the potential for transferring learning between communities, both minority and majority.

RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The research has a number of inter-related aims:

- To identify and articulate the specific perspectives and experiences of parenting alone of people from ethnic minority communities
- To locate the issues facing lone parents from ethnic minority communities within the broader social policy context in relation to parenting alone
- To examine the additional barriers faced by lone parents from ethnic minority groups, for example racism, and locate these issues within broader debates on migration, racism, poverty and social exclusion
- To develop solutions at practice and policy level to identified needs in conjunction with a range of ethnic minority organisations.

To achieve these aims, the following research objectives have been identified:

- To document the experiences of lone parents from ethnic minority communities who are parenting alone
- To examine the particular issues facing lone parents from ethnic minorities in accessing and benefiting from state services
- To develop a series of recommendations, to address the barriers facing lone parents, with other organisations working with ethnic minority groups.

UNDERTAKING THE RESEARCH

A key first step in the research methodology for this project is establishing an Advisory Group of relevant stakeholders to guide and advise on the research project, support the participation of lone parents from ethnic minority communities, and contribute to the development of recommendations arising from the research. If your organisation is interested in becoming involved contact details are provided overleaf.

Desk research and a literature review will be undertaken to inform the research context. This will feed into the development of a

questionnaire for relevant stakeholders, including both lone parents from ethnic minority communities, and institutional stakeholders. On foot of analysis of the data arising from the questionnaires, a number of focus groups will be held throughout the country, where the particular issues emerging can be explored further with lone parents.

Following the documentation and analysis of the findings from the focus groups, to further inform the development of recommendations and highlight the research findings, a national seminar will be held for both 'internal' and 'external' stakeholders.

Finally, a research report detailing findings and recommendations will be published and disseminated to all relevant stakeholders.

WHAT THE RESEARCH WILL ACHIEVE

The experience of parenting alone is strongly influenced by the cultural context in which lone parenthood takes place, for example, the issue of stigma that is consistently raised by OPEN's member groups is strongly associated with traditional Irish cultural values around marriage, parenting and the role of women. For those from ethnic minority communities, racism is often also part of the context.

This research provides the first opportunity to explore the experiences of lone parents from ethnic minority communities in Ireland, examine their particular needs, and how these can best be addressed.

This unique research project will, for the first time in an Irish context:

- Provide information on the experiences of, and issues facing, lone parents from ethnic minority communities
- Document the experiences of lone parents from ethnic minority communities and articulate how issues of racism, uncertain immigration status, and the impact of immigration processes, contribute to – and in some cases create – poverty and social exclusion among

lone parents from ethnic minority communities

- Increase understanding among a range of stakeholders of the unique living experience of lone parents from ethnic minority communities and propose appropriate solutions
- Inform public debate and policy development, so that challenges faced by lone parents from ethnic minorities are better understood, thereby supporting the development of appropriate responses.

Author: Gráinne O'Toole

For more information on this research project, please contact Gráinne at 01 8148860 or gotoole@oneparent.ie

The state has proposed radical changes in the nature of supports to lone parents; here OPEN gives it's response to these proposals, and gives key recommendations for achieving real improvements to the lives of all one-parent families

Will government proposals really tackle poverty and social exclusion for one-parent families?

INTRODUCTION

In April 2006 the Department of Social and Community Affairs published a Discussion Paper setting out proposals to change the way the state provides support for lone parents. A summary of the key changes is outlined in Box 1 overleaf.

In forming our response, OPEN consulted extensively with its member groups, and found much to welcome. For example, recognising parenting as a contingency within the social welfare system and ending the ban on cohabitation are positive and progressive steps. Moving away from the male breadwinner model by recognising the right of individuals to receive their payment directly is also welcome. Recognition of the many barriers that lone parents face in attempting to achieve security and financial independence, and the importance of balancing work and family commitments is vital. Other aspects gave cause for considerable concern, not least the creation of a new age-related poverty trap that could see a working lone parent lose nearly €90 a week.

While some lone parents do not wish to engage in paid employment while they are raising their children, most are eager to earn a decent living. The Discussion Paper estimates that 60% of One-Parent Family Payment recipients are in employment, albeit this is generally low paid work. However OPEN members are very frustrated about the difficulties they face in securing reasonable employment within the hours they can manage, getting quality childcare at realistic times, and at an affordable cost, and about the effects of wages on family income. Concerns were also voiced about children with additional

needs, ranging from children with disabilities to those with behavioural issues, and the pressures those children could face if their main caregiver was forced to take up work.

OPEN sees in these proposals a significant opportunity to achieve lasting and progressive change for one-parent families, an opportunity we are keen to ensure is not squandered. The Paper notes that "*achieving government policy and targets in this area will require a fundamental change in direction*" – without such fundamental change, the Proposals run the risk of reinforcing the exclusion experienced by so many lone parents. The success of this initiative is dependent on a comprehensive and integrated package of reforms being implemented in a co-ordinated and coherent way across a range of policy areas.

MAKING WORK PAY

Making work pay means ensuring that participation in employment always results in real, meaningful and proportionate increases in living standards and that poverty and unemployment traps are eliminated.

The stated aim of the government proposals is to tackle the high level of poverty that one-parent families experience. The belief that

Box 1: Proposed changes in social welfare supports for lone parents

A radical change in the nature of social welfare supports is proposed - the One-Parent Family Payment would be abolished and replaced with a new Parental Allowance, paid at the same rate as the current One-Parent Family Payment.

The Parental Allowance would be available to all low income parents, not just lone parents, but would only be paid until the youngest child reached age 8. After this, unemployed parents, whether parenting alone or with a partner, would have to rely on the Job Seekers Allowance.

Key changes proposed to social welfare supports

Current situation	Proposals in Discussion Document
To claim the One-Parent Family Payment a parent must be living alone; you cannot claim the payment if you are living with your partner or husband/wife	The Parental Allowance could be claimed by <i>all</i> parents on low incomes, whether they live alone, with a partner, or are married
Only one of a child's parents can claim the One-Parent Family Payment	The Parental Allowance would also only be paid to one parent, and would not be split between them
The One-Parent Family Payment is paid directly to the parent, giving some level of income security	The Parental Allowance will also be paid directly to the parent, even if their partner is also receiving a social welfare payment
If a lone parent moves in with a partner who is on a social welfare payment, the couple receives €62.50 a week less than they do when living apart	If a lone parent moves in with a partner on social welfare, the couple will not receive any less money, but only while in receipt of Parental Allowance
If a lone parent moves in with a partner who is working, their wages will be included in the means test for a social welfare payment	A partner's income from employment will still be included in the means test for the Parental Allowance
Lone parents can claim the One-Parent Family Payment until their youngest child is 18, or 22 if in full-time education	The Parental Allowance will stop when the child is much younger – the Department's proposal is that it would stop when the youngest child turns 8
<p>Lone parents who have paid work have their One-Parent Family Payment reduced as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The One-Parent Family Payment is still paid at full rate if earnings are less than €146.50 per week • If earnings go over €400 per week, a half rate One-Parent Family Payment can be paid for 6 months, after that, entitlement to the Payment ceases • Where wages are between these two levels, half of the amount over €146.50 is counted as means, and the payment is reduced accordingly 	<p>Under the proposed Parental Allowance, parents who have paid work would have the payment reduced as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The earnings disregard would be reduced to €120 • Upper limit would be increased to €400 (this was implemented in Budget 2007) • Where wages are between these two levels, €4 out of every €10 earned above the limit will count as means, reduced from €5 out of €10 as is currently the case

Box 1: Proposed changes in social welfare supports for lone parents

Current situation	Proposals in Discussion Document
Lone parents do not have to look for, or accept, employment unless they want to	A couple of years before the Parental Allowance finishes, parents will have to come to interviews about going to training / education / employment. When the Parental Allowance is finished, parents who are not in training / education / employment would have to apply for a different social welfare payment; for most, this would be Job Seekers Allowance
Where both people in a couple are on unemployment, they are paid one full rate of €185.80 per week, one reduced rate of €123.30 and €22 is paid for each child	This will mostly stay the same, meaning that when the Parental Allowance is finished, a parent living with an unemployed partner could both have their payments reduced by €62.50 per week
To get an unemployment payment, you must be looking for full-time work	As part of these proposals, a person will be able to claim unemployment if they want to work part-time – defined as 19 hours a week
Widows who are not covered in the social insurance system can claim the Widows Non-Contributory Pension	The Widows Non-Contributory Pension would be abolished – widows with young children would apply for the Parental Allowance, those with older children would have to apply for unemployment

participation in employment is the best route out of poverty is core to government policy. However, for lone parents, working can often mean that they are *worse off* financially¹.

Unfortunately, while the proposals in the Government Discussion Paper acknowledge the problem, they do not make specific proposals on how this should be addressed. In addition, OPEN has identified a new poverty trap in the government proposals. These issues are addressed in turn below.

CURRENT INCOME SUPPORT ARRANGEMENTS

Many of the problems with current income support arrangements relate to the range of ‘secondary benefits’ – additional supplements to help low income families meet particular costs – rather than the operation of the One-Parent Family Payment. For those affected, Rent Supplement is the most important of these, but other secondary benefits can play a significant role too.

Rent Supplement

Over 13,000 lone parents living in the private rented sector are reliant on Rent Supplement – almost a quarter of all recipients of this payment. While the Government Discussion Paper recognises that Rent Supplement can create a substantial employment disincentive, it doesn’t propose a solution.

There are some relevant policy developments. For example, the new Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) helps address the financial penalty associated with participating in employment; although implementation has been slow to date (proposals are currently being progressed to enhance access to the scheme). In addition, the Social Welfare and Pensions Act 2007, includes important improvements to the Rent Supplement scheme – easing the earnings assessment and enabling those qualifying for RAS to participate in full-time employment. But these cannot be seen as complete solutions.

For the 9,000 lone parents estimated to be eligible for RAS, and for whom RAS may provide a response to their accommodation need, OPEN recommends that a transitional arrangement be put in place: lone parents who are qualified for RAS, but are waiting for the completion of the process, should have their rent assessed on the basis of RAS rules, thereby enabling them to pursue paid employment.

More fundamentally, with lone parents constituting 38% of those on the waiting list for social housing – equivalent to almost 17,000 one-parent families – greater investment in the supply of social housing is urgently required.

Other Secondary Benefits

Other secondary benefits of particular relevance for one-parent families include the Medical Card, Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) and Fuel Allowance.

Each of these supports has its own means assessment, making the system complicated and difficult for all, but the experts, to understand. Lone parents generally can't determine what their entitlements to such vital supports might be where they have earnings,

making it practically impossible to work out net income. This lack of certainty does not support 'risk taking' – people are often understandably reluctant to take up employment when they cannot establish how this will affect social welfare entitlements, and therefore their total 'take home' income. Research jointly commissioned by OPEN and the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) – *Out of the Traps? Making Work Pay for People in Poverty* has examined these issues in detail, and makes a range of specific recommendations to address these problems².

OPEN proposes that the full range of supports be examined as a package to make work pay, and recommends a number of principles to guide such a review (see Box 2).

PROPOSED INCOME SUPPORT ARRANGEMENTS

The Discussion Paper proposal to introduce a new social welfare payment, the Parental Allowance, also incorporates changes in the way earned income is assessed.

Assessing earned income

The way earnings are assessed on the One-Parent Family Payment is intended *"to cover employment related expenses including*

Box 2: Making Work Pay – Guiding Principles

- Make work pay for everyone - individuals shouldn't have to rely on particular 'welfare-to-work' schemes
- The system is as simple as possible – both from the perspective of claimants and administrators. Clear, comprehensive and reliable information is critical for informed decision making
- Entitlement to supports should be assessed on the basis of needs and means only, ensuring that participation in employment is always supported
- Benefits should always be withdrawn on a tapered basis
- The number of different means tests used should be reduced
- A standard basis of income assessment should be used
- All disregards, thresholds, ceilings etc. should be reviewed on an annual basis to maintain their value
- A pro-active approach to the take-up of benefits should be implemented e.g. direct mailing application forms, automatic award where information is already on the system
- Accessing employment supports should not be dependent on the participation of employers

*childcare and to enable lone parents to more easily assess the implications of taking up employment or training*⁶. However, proposed changes to the income support arrangements don't take account of this aim.

- **Earnings disregard:** The Discussion Paper proposes that the earnings disregard be reduced, arguing that it creates an artificial ceiling to lone parents' earnings. However, the Department's data shows that a majority (57%) of earning recipients have income above the disregard and that, in fact, wage levels are not concentrated just below the disregard level⁴. OPEN concludes therefore that there is no argument in support of reducing the earnings disregard.
- **Earned income ceiling:** The welcome proposal to raise the ceiling to €400 was implemented in Budget 2007, however this does not go far enough. This increase is warranted in light of the growth in average industrial earnings⁵. When childcare costs are factored in – which have risen 23% in 2½ years⁶ – and in the absence of an alternative proposal to assist lone parents with their childcare costs, OPEN recommends increasing the ceiling to at least €500.

A new poverty trap

The proposals as currently structured will create a significant poverty trap at the point when the Parental Allowance ceases and claimants transfer to Job Seeker's Allowance. For lone parents working, for example, 20 hours a week on the minimum wage, the loss in income is equivalent to almost €90 per week, or over €4,600 a year⁷.

The poverty trap is primarily the result of two factors. Firstly, the Parental Allowance and Job Seeker's Allowance assess earned income differently – the latter is a more stringent assessment. In addition, the Job Seeker's Allowance assessment takes no account of the childcare costs which a lone parent must pay from just one wage. Crucially this poverty trap

will not impact on lone parents who remain unemployed; it is working lone parents who will be punished. This is clearly contrary to the stated aims of the reform.

The second factor only affects couples. Although both individuals will be required to meet the 'genuinely seeking work' criteria to qualify for Job Seeker's Allowance, this will not be reflected in their level of payment. Unemployed couples are subject to 'limitation'. This means their household payment cannot exceed that of a claimant and an adult dependent (a 'qualified adult'). The rate for a qualified adult is only two-thirds the claimants' (as they are currently regarded as economic dependents and therefore not, at present, required to seek work), meaning the couple's income would fall by €62.50 a week. As both individuals will have to meet 'genuinely seeking work' criteria, OPEN believes they should both be entitled to the full rate of payment.

OPEN believes that the proposed recognition of parenting as a contingency in the social welfare system is valid and useful; however the poverty trap issues must be addressed effectively. One way of doing this would be to use the Parental Allowance means assessment for parents, while those without children would be assessed on the basis of the standard Job Seeker's Allowance rules.

OTHER ISSUES FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY AFFAIRS

As part of the government proposals, a reduction in the requirement around availability for employment is planned: currently, to qualify for an unemployment payment a person must be available for full-time employment; it is proposed to reduce this to a minimum requirement of 19 hours a week, which is very welcome.

However, there are other issues to be addressed in the guidelines on unemployment payments. These are summarised in Box 3 overleaf.

Box 3: Taking account of lone parents' needs in guidelines for unemployment payments

- Unemployment is currently defined as working three days out of any consecutive six; working an hour during the day counts as a day's employment. Many lone parents work when their children are in school i.e. they work part-time over five days. Unemployment would more usefully be defined as less than 19 hours a week, better reflecting modern working patterns.
- The challenges of securing childcare must be recognised in the guidelines. It is not reasonable in the current market to expect a person to secure childcare within a day as the guidelines currently state.
- Bearing in mind that the overall aim of the proposals is to address the poverty experienced by one-parent families, it must be recognised that the availability and affordability of childcare may limit the jobs that lone parents are realistically able to consider.
- The scheduling of working hours is important: lone parents should not be required to work hours that a parent might reasonably believe will have a negative impact on their child(ren).
- Due consideration must be given to parents of children with additional needs: requiring parental labour market activity may prove detrimental to these children's welfare.

CHILDCARE

Every lone parent who wants to engage in labour market activity should have access to quality, affordable childcare that meets their needs and those of their children.

The Proposals correctly make reform of the income support system contingent on the availability and affordability of quality childcare. The Senior Officials Group on Social Inclusion notes that progress in relation to the National Childcare Investment Programme *"is an essential complement to this initiative, especially after-school and holiday care"*. The Group made a number of suggestions as to how lone parents' childcare needs could be supported, including Department of Social and Family Affairs Jobs Facilitators providing advice on accessing childcare; giving lone parents priority access to subsidised childcare places; and considering allowing Jobs Facilitators provide financial supports⁸.

This initiative cannot succeed in the absence of a clear, practical and effective system of

childcare support. OPEN reinforces the Group's view that increasing the availability of childcare after school and during school holidays is critically important. Transport between school and after-school care is another dimension of this problem that needs to be addressed. It should be noted that the idea of prioritising lone parents for access to places is unlikely to be a practical option – not least because in addition to the approximately 80,000 lone parents, there are a further 20,000 partners of unemployed people targeted by these proposals, who will also be in need of childcare.

OPEN believes that structured mediation in accessing childcare should form an integral part of the activation process, for example, via Job Facilitator liaison with County Childcare Committees. Financial support must be provided that has the flexibility to offset the costs of those who must rely on private sector provision, or, where other options are not available or suitable, to meet the costs of a member of the extended family, neighbour etc. who is willing to provide childcare informally.

During our consultations, lone parents expressed concerns that pressure to participate in the labour market could have a negative impact on children. In particular, the issue of ‘latch key kids’ was raised, and OPEN believes that this is a valid concern. We stress that a key factor in ensuring a positive disposition by lone parents towards activation will be the nature and level of support available to provide appropriate and affordable childcare while they are in training, education or employment.

LABOUR MARKET SUPPORTS

Labour market services should work with lone parents to develop a tailored package of supports that enables them to avail of quality and sustainable employment with the capacity to deliver financial independence.

A substantial body of literature exists detailing the range and nature of barriers women, and in particular mothers, face in participating in the labour market. Most recently, this issue was examined by the National Economic & Social Forum (NESF), in its report on ‘Creating an Inclusive Labour Market’⁹, which includes a number of proposals to address these issues.

Labour market disadvantage

The barriers to labour market participation facing very vulnerable individuals are multifaceted. Research commissioned from WRC Social and Economic Consultants¹⁰ by the NESF project team on creating a more inclusive labour market conceptualised these in terms of:

- **Personal factors:** e.g. health and housing issues, literacy difficulties, psycho-social problems, etc.;
- **Labour market factors:** both supply side (e.g. poor information on employment opportunities, low educational and/or skills levels, poor employment history, language difficulties) and demand side issues (e.g. informal recruitment practices, minimum entry requirements, prejudice, lack of flexible work practices);

- **Economic factors:** e.g. lack of jobs and or sectoral shifts in the local labour market, low wages and precarious employment; *and*
- **Social policy factors:** e.g. poverty and unemployment traps, childcare and other social care, lack of transport.

The research noted that these barriers are experienced by individuals, not singly, but as groupings or clusters. A comprehensive approach requires engagement with all of these arenas. Successful labour market strategies must ensure that the elements needed to identify and address the needs of an individual are in place at local level. Thus vulnerable individuals will be assisted in choosing the appropriate elements which can work together to achieve a positive result. These individuals experience barriers ‘in the round’ and it is in the round that they must be addressed¹¹.

Such an approach is a core concept of the Developmental Welfare State i.e. ‘tailored universalism’¹²; however, achieving it requires a radical reorientation by current service providers.

Lone parents and the labour market

Increasing the labour market participation of lone parents should be seen in terms of short term and medium/long term objectives:

- Achieving the Lisbon target in relation to increasing female labour market participation
- Addressing high levels of poverty amongst lone parents and their children
- Reducing welfare dependency

The principal constraints on lone parents’ (who are welfare claimants) labour market engagement are low education and/or skills levels, the cost and availability of childcare, and the financial return from employment. Access to quality education and training programmes is key to addressing these barriers and attaining policy objectives. Enhanced skill levels make it easier for lone parents to engage in the labour market, even if on a part-time basis. Facilitating engagement on a flexible basis can reduce the need for childcare, increasing the financial return from

employment. In the short term, skills acquisition enables lone parents to command a level of earnings that allows reduced working hours, with an increase in income. In the medium to long term, maintaining labour market participation (even on a part-time basis) will facilitate increased working hours when children are older, at a level of earnings which will create financial independence and reduce welfare dependency significantly.

Enabling the labour market participation of lone parents

The ability of lone parents to acquire skills and qualifications which have currency in the labour market is critical to a successful labour market activation process. Lone parents need training and education on a flexible basis that delivers enhanced levels of marketable skills equivalent to those available in full-time training. The full-time centre-based training which FÁS provides has a strong record of achieving progression into decent, sustainable employment but is not readily accessible to lone parents. Some key barriers in this respect include:

- The FÁS childcare subsidy – at €63.50 a week for full-time participants – falls far short of the actual cost;
- Most quality training is only available on a full-time basis, and the 8.30am start time doesn't recognise the reality of parenting – you can't leave a child at the school gates at 7.30-8am;
- The location of training centres and lack of public transport makes it difficult to get to the training centre, particularly out of the major urban centres.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria for programmes can also present barriers. Educational criteria can sometimes be an unnecessary barrier, particularly if accreditation of prior experience was facilitated. In addition, a number of labour market programmes use age limits and duration of social welfare receipt to determine eligibility – a barrier which remains relevant despite being highlighted in the 2001 NESF Report on Lone Parents. Many of these are arbitrary criteria which were put in place in a

radically different labour market context. They should now be re-evaluated and amended as appropriate.

Labour market mediation

The process of agreeing a comprehensive progression pathway to the labour market requires an understanding of the complexity of issues which lone parents must manage in their day-to-day lives. They do not have the same labour market availability as unemployed people, and child welfare concerns must be integral to the process. Accordingly, all staff engaging with lone parents should receive training so as to understand, and be equipped to address, the particular and diverse issues and needs of one-parent families. Providing an integrated response means, for example, that support to secure affordable childcare should be integral to the activation process, and that staff can work out the financial implications of participating in different options.

CONCLUSION

The Government Discussion Paper on Supporting Lone Parents proposes radical change which, if properly implemented, has the capacity to make a decisive impact on the disproportionate levels of poverty experienced by one-parent families. However, simply extending the process of engagement developed for unemployed people – as proposed in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion – will not meet the needs of lone parents. Making work pay, delivering an effective childcare support process and ensuring the availability of high quality training and education options are among the key areas that need to be addressed. Failure to provide a comprehensive response is likely to increase the exclusion suffered by the growing number of lone parents and their children.

The implementation of such a new process presents an opportunity for learning – one that will be missed unless an effective data collection and monitoring systems is put in place to support quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the impact of the process.

Capturing data on the nature of barriers experienced, the availability or otherwise of appropriate supports, and a systematic process of follow-up on medium to long-term outcomes is critical.

The 'acid test' of whether the process actually meets the needs of lone parents will be whether it is voluntary or mandatory in nature: a process that delivers quality outcomes for lone parents won't need to rely on compulsion; a sub-standard process will have to.

The participation of lone parents in the design and implementation of policy can make a positive contribution to the development of effective policy and institutions. OPEN is keen to play a meaningful role in supporting the development and implementation of policy with the capacity to make a positive impact on poverty and social exclusion in one-parent families.

Author: Camille Loftus

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This is a three year project examining mental health issues experienced by lone parents in four different communities. We present an overview of the policy context of this work; the main research findings and also set out key recommendations for OPEN and policy makers.

Building Healthy Communities: Tackling mental health issues with lone parents

INTRODUCTION

OPEN is currently undertaking a project exploring mental health issues experienced by lone parents – health was one of the issues prioritised by our member groups under our Strategic Plan. Poor mental health experienced by lone parents often results from stigmatisation and isolation, and our project hopes to identify strategies to promote their better mental health. The three year project is funded by the Combat Poverty Agency under its Building Healthy Communities Programme.

Two key approaches inform the work of the project. Firstly, recognising the central importance of socio-economic factors in determining mental health and, in particular, the role of poverty. The World Health Organisation (WHO) Regional Committee for Europe noted that: *“Poverty and mental ill health form a vicious circle: poverty is both a major cause of poor mental health and a potential consequence of it”*.

The Chief Medical Officer noted that *“many of the causal factors of health inequalities, such as poverty and unemployment, are outside the direct control of the health services”*.¹ Given that almost a third (27.2%) of one-parent families live in consistent poverty², this broader approach to tackling mental health issues is a critical element informing OPEN’s approach.

Secondly, the promotion of community development approaches in developing appropriate responses to health issues is a key feature. *“A community development approach to health recognises the central importance of social support networks. It is a process by which a community defines its own needs to bring about change.*

The emphasis is on collective action to redress inequalities in health and access to healthcare. Using this definition of community work, a distinction can clearly be drawn between it and community based initiatives where services are delivered in a community based setting”.³

From OPEN’s perspective, the objectives of employing a community development approach to tackling health inequalities are to ensure that:

- lone parents analyse and define their own health needs
- lone parents inform the development of responses and strategies to collectively address these needs
- lone parents participate fully in actions and initiatives to address their needs
- lone parents are fully involved within decision making bodies/structures that affect their health
- lone parents are fully involved in bringing about collective social change.

The first element of the project comprised research exploring the issues of poor mental health and responses to it, involving extensive consultation with lone parent

groups and service providers in four areas: Kerry (Dingle), Galway (City), Longford (Longford town) and Dublin (Tallaght).

This research is now complete, and generated a number of recommendations. Here we provide an overview of the research, its key findings and the recommendations developed.

Twelve Key Areas of Action for Mental Health In Europe (Helsinki Declaration)

1. Promote mental well-being for all
2. Demonstrate the centrality of mental health
3. Tackle stigma and discrimination
4. Promote activities sensitive to vulnerable life stages
5. Prevent mental health problems and suicides
6. Ensure access to good primary care for mental health problems
7. Offer effective care in community-based services for people with severe mental health problems
8. Establish partnerships across sectors
9. Create a sufficient and competent workforce
10. Establish good mental health information
11. Provide fair and adequate funding
12. Evaluate effectiveness and generate new evidence.

MENTAL HEALTH: THE POLICY CONTEXT

An overview of the international policy context

Mental health is defined by the WHO as *“a state of well being in which the individual realises his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”*.⁴ In January 2005, The Mental Health Declaration for Europe and the Mental Health Action Plan were signed and endorsed at a European level (known as the Helsinki Declaration). The central approach espoused within these

documents is that *“there is no health without mental health. Mental health is central to the human, social and economic capital of nations and should therefore be considered as an integral and essential part of other public policy areas such as human rights, social care, education and employment”*.⁵ The Helsinki Declaration provides a framework for action on mental health issues at a European level; the key areas for action are set out above.

The WHO's work on mental health led to a response being developed at EU level: the European Commission adopted a Green Paper, *“Promoting the mental health of the population for the EU: Towards a strategy on mental health for the EU”*. The Green Paper launched a public consultation on how better to tackle mental illness and promote mental well-being in the EU, in line with the mandate for action at Community level. The EU Commission is now drafting a Communication which will set out a strategy on mental health. Its adoption is scheduled to take place during spring of 2007; key policy priorities in the Green Paper are set out below.

Key policy priorities identified in the EU Green Paper on promoting mental health

- Foster awareness of the importance of mental well-being
- Collectively tackle stigma, discrimination and inequality, and empower and support people with mental health problems and their families to be actively engaged in this process
- Design and implement comprehensive, integrated and efficient mental health systems that cover promotion, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, care and recovery
- Address the need for a competent workforce, effective in all those areas
- Recognise the experience and knowledge of service users and carers as an important basis for planning and developing services.

The Irish Policy Context

The National Health Strategy puts service users at the centre of health policy in Ireland and commits to preparing a national policy framework to further modernise mental health services in Ireland. To advance this commitment an Expert Working Group on Mental Health Policy was established: its report is entitled *A Vision for Change*. This document incorporates the central policies of the National Health Strategy and provides the policy framework within which mental health services will be developed over the coming years. *A Vision for Change* recommends full involvement of the community in developing holistic approaches to addressing the multiplicity of factors contributing to mental health problems. It envisages an approach that goes beyond consultation and puts service users “at the centre of decision making at an individual level in terms of the services available to them, through to the strategic development of local services and national policy”. The document recommends a model of mental health promotion, which works at three levels:

- **Strengthening individuals:** through interventions to promote self esteem, life and coping skills
- **Strengthening communities:** increasing social inclusion and participation, improving neighbourhood environments, developing health and social services that support mental health such as anti-bullying strategies at school, workplace health, community safety and childcare and self-help networks
- **Reducing structural barriers to mental health:** through initiatives to reduce discrimination and inequalities and to promote access to education, meaningful employment, housing, services and support for those who are vulnerable⁶.

The Report identifies many possibilities for “service users and carer groups to become involved in the development and delivery of mental health care”. These include:

- Assuming an advocacy/campaigning role on policy, legislation and mental health delivery
- Taking on an educational role aimed at sensitising the general public to the need to integrate people with mental health difficulties into community life
- Providing education and training to service users and carers
- Delivering mental health services such as self-help services, drop-in centres, and assistance with activities of daily living and community reintegration⁷.

The Department of Health and Children’s publication *Primary Care: A New Direction*⁸ also endorses a people centred approach and seeks to strengthen community participation within primary care “by encouraging and facilitating the involvement of local community and voluntary groups in the planning and delivery of primary care services”. The Health Service Executive (HSE) has established an Implementation Group to “action the recommendations of the Report of the Expert Group on the Mental Health Policy Document - *A Vision for Change*”. It is envisaged that the “Implementation Group will guide and resource service managers and clinicians in making the recommendations of *A Vision for Change* a reality. Key priorities include:

- Establishment of the Service User Executive,
- Developing Mental Health in Primary Care initiatives, and
- Provision of additional community based multidisciplinary mental health teams⁹.

LONE PARENTS’ EXPERIENCE OF POOR MENTAL HEALTH

An overwhelming majority (90%) of the lone parents participating in the research had experienced depression. A number of key themes emerged from research in relation to poor mental health among the lone parent population. The high rates of poverty, and the social exclusion that results, were significant factors. Another finding that ran through lone parents’ contributions was their experience of stigma, which compounded the isolation they often felt. Discriminatory attitudes towards

lone parents were identified at individual and institutional level.

The main stressors identified by lone parents were:

- financial issues
- the stress of parenting alone
- relationships with ex-partners
- emotional issues
- housing and accommodation issues, and
- time management

Most participants (85%) had experienced sleep deprivation as a result of stress. For those living in remote areas with limited access to public transport, the sense of isolation they experience was compounded by having limited access to social contacts or services; they felt the stigma associated with lone parenthood more keenly, and were often reluctant to join lone parent self-help groups.

Isolation and Stigma

One of the key issues for lone parents is the stigmatisation and stereotyping of lone parents that exists at all levels of society. All of the participants spoke of feeling judged by society, the media, Government officials, neighbours and even family members. Lone parents are acutely aware of the stereotyped attitudes that exist, such as the belief that lone parents deliberately have children in order to secure social housing or extra benefits:

“They think you are having a baby to get a house and they act like we are ripping off the state”.

Participants believed that having to rely on social welfare payments reinforces this stigma and has an adverse affect on the mental health of recipients, in terms of their stress levels and feelings of self-worth:

“You feel like a scrounger, like nothing”
“Being on the payment (One Parent Family Payment) makes you feel less”.

Experience of Depression

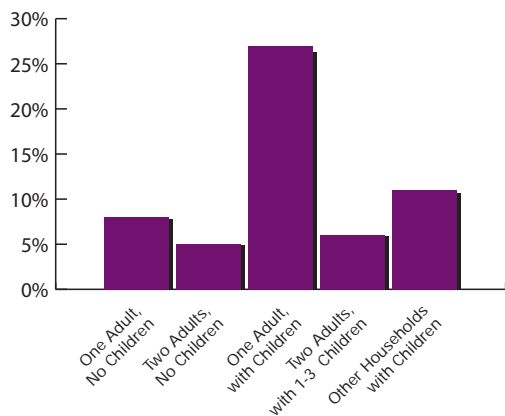
90% of research participants indicated that they had experienced depression. The participants’ understandings of depression related to four core areas:

- **Being emotional:**
“crying a lot and not knowing why, feel like crying all the time, crying most nights. Feeling low, feeling down, feeling alone”;
- **Lacking confidence:**
“feeling inadequate, overwhelmed and unable to cope”, “mental paralysis”;
- **Being apathetic or lacking motivation:**
“not having the get up and go to better you. Not wanting to wake up and face everyday life, not wanting to get out of bed and get dressed”; and
- **Not feeling in control of themselves or their lives:**
“everything is difficult to achieve”, “like climbing a tall cliff”, “unable to get by in day to day life”.

Participants felt that anxiety, stress and depression had an effect on the quality of their parenting: 76% felt that their parenting was affected, and 62% said this affected their children:

“I’m so preoccupied with money worries that I forget to play and chat with them”,
“the children either tip toe around me or play up for attention”.

Consistent Poverty by Household Composition



Poverty

Poverty emerged in the research findings as a significant contributory factor affecting the mental health of lone parents. All of the participants in the research were recipients of the One Parent Family Payment (OFP), reliance on social welfare is associated with a very high risk of poverty: almost a third – 27.2% – of one-parent families live in consistent poverty, and enforced deprivation

of basic necessities is highest among the children of one-parent families¹⁰.

The lack of financial resources and dependence on social welfare payments creates huge financial pressures for lone parents. This is a significant cause of anxiety in their lives and further compounds the isolation they experience:

“Lack of money for shopping and bills takes up the most energy and causes the most worry and stress. €19 per child per week doesn't go very far, nappies and baby wipes cost that much”.

Housing and accommodation

Lack of access to an affordable, secure home close to essential public services and social networks is intrinsically related to the high rates of poverty among lone parents, and lack of access to adequate housing was repeatedly raised as a factor adversely affecting mental health. Housing issues facing lone parents include:

- A significant proportion of one-parent families do not have access to adequate accommodation. Although one-parent families represent 12% of all households in Ireland¹¹, they constitute 38% of the waiting list for social housing, two-thirds of whom have been waiting for more than a year¹². 13,889 lone parents are reliant on Rent Supplement¹³ – the largest category of social welfare recipient claiming this payment (23% of total). In addition to the insecurity often associated with living in the private rented sector, Rent Supplement can constitute a significant poverty and unemployment trap.
- For some of those living in the private rented sector poor quality accommodation was an issue, with cold and damp being particular issues. Many spoke of the poor quality of accommodation available at the levels of rent they could afford. Participants also spoke of the high levels of anxiety in relation to the poverty unemployment trap associated with the Rent Supplement payment.

- Some research participants were still living in their own parent's home, many of them in overcrowded conditions. Such living arrangements can be the source of considerable stress. All felt compelled to obey their parent's rules and to accept their parent's style of parenting in relation to raising their own children. This could sometimes be difficult as the parenting styles of each generation were very different and often confused children and caused friction between lone parents and their own parents.

Access to Information

Participants reported difficulties in accessing information on services and entitlements for lone parents. Many participants said they didn't know where to begin looking for information, and they relied on their friends and family as information sources. Lone parents said they were confused and frustrated about how to get information on the kind of supports available to them from various Government departments, and agencies. Services were described as disjointed and the relevant local Government offices are “scattered everywhere”. In addition, in more rural areas the points of information weren't as readily identifiable.

“It's very hard to find out about what's out there for lone parents. You are never sure about what is available or what you are entitled to unless you go out searching. You hear from other people, like friends and family. You hear rumours but not concrete information”.

Some had failed to access supports simply because they hadn't known they were eligible for them.

Quality Customer Service

An issue of considerable importance to participants was the attitudes of some members of the public service (e.g. Community Welfare Officers (CWO's) and staff in the Department of Social and Family Affairs) that they came into contact with, some of whom were described as unhelpful,

unprofessional and rude. Lone parents said they often felt that some staff treated them “as if they were giving you money out of their own pockets” rather than a social welfare payment to which they were entitled.

“The attitudes of some CWO’s and some social welfare staff are appalling. They belittle applicants and act in a very unprofessional way, they aren’t compassionate at all, they don’t understand. It can really make you feel awful”.

This emerged as a key issue of concern and the lone parents involved expressed how deeply the attitudes and behaviour of staff affected their confidence and feelings of self-worth.

“If they (CWO’s) just gave us more consideration, they can actually cause some lone parents to miss out on their entitlements because they don’t want to go back to the CWO after they have their first appointment – that’s how bad they can make you feel”.

Barriers to Education and Training

While many participants were interested in participating in education, training and employment, the research identified a number of barriers that prevented them moving forward:

- **Rent Supplement Payment:** The participants expressed high levels of anxiety in relation to the unemployment trap associated with Rent Supplement. They were frustrated by the restrictions placed on working and training when in receipt of the payment:

“When you try to better yourself through training, education or employment they take your social welfare money away, especially Rent Allowance”.

The fear of losing Rent Supplement is a significant factor that prevents lone parents accessing employment or training and adds to the stress and worry that is caused by lack of financial resources.

“Rent Allowance and not being able to work is very stressful for me. They need to make it easier for us to work so we are less reliant on the payment and on Rent Allowance then we wouldn’t worry about lack of money so much”.

- **Affordable Childcare:** Lack of access to affordable childcare prevents lone parents availing of a range of opportunities – participants repeatedly stress that they couldn’t avail of education or training programmes unless the issue of childcare is addressed.

“If there was no childcare here I wouldn’t be able to do this course”.

Participating in training/education programmes reduces feelings of stigmatisation: when participating lone parents said they felt they are doing something “productive” in order to “better themselves”. Completing a training/education course generated a feeling of achievement that contributed to their sense of dignity and self worth.

- **Rural Context:** Participants living in rural areas noted that they were often told that there were often not enough people interested in a course to justify running it.

COPING WITH POOR MENTAL HEALTH

Benefits of involvement in a lone parent group

Being part of a local lone parent self-help group emerged as a valuable resource in coping with feelings of depression, anxiety and stress, providing support, a place to meet new friends, access to information, as well as training and education courses, and helping them feel part of the community:

“I definitely gained a more positive outlook, you feel like nothing is impossible and anything is achievable. The courses made you more self aware too, like you know what you want, what your skills are, and how to move forward in life”.

Membership of such a group allowed lone parents to acknowledge their problems and show their feelings; the groups provided a forum for getting together with people who experienced similar problems and issues. Participants said they felt less stigmatised when involved in training and education options provided by their lone parent support groups, and had a sense of achievement on completing a course. The subsidised quality childcare available through many of these groups was critical in enabling participation.

Hobbies & Community Involvement

Participants highlighted that hobbies that involve social interaction, as well as involvement in community activities, can promote positive mental health by reducing isolation and loneliness. Other than their involvement with the local lone parent group, few of the participants had much involvement in their local community and access to social activities. For most, this was because they couldn't afford to participate; a related issue was that their children were also unable to access extra-curricular activities.

Children's Involvement

The mental health of lone parents is closely connected with that of their children. Some lone parents spoke of the positive effects of attending structured childcare environments – children in a crèche environment benefited from receiving care from trained childcare workers and socialising with other children, contributing positively to child development. Many lone parents said that the stress they experienced impacted on the interaction they had with their children; they expressed a desire to have more fun with their children and to spend more quality time with them.

"I need more time to spend with my friends and family but also with my children, just more time to sit and play with them".

OPEN'S RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY-MAKERS

The research developed a series of recommendations for policy-makers, located within the current policy context, aimed at

addressing mental health issues with and for lone parents:

- **Community participation in the design, planning and delivery of mental health responses to lone parents:** Ensuring that lone parent organisations participate in the design, planning and delivery of mental health initiatives and services is central to the development of work in this area. Actions would include the HSE making resources available to lone parent organisations to enable their participation in assessing mental health issues facing their community; defining the main health problems/issues; setting priorities for action; implementing those actions and monitoring and evaluating the results.
- **Development of Lone Parent Leaders:** Lone parent groups, with the support of the HSE, OPEN and other relevant bodies, should ensure that lone parents have the supports necessary to take up leadership, representational, mentoring and advocacy roles.
- **Representation and participation of lone parents in decision making structures** Lone parent groups should be centrally involved within the relevant HSE policy structures. Community participation at this level would enable lone parent organisations and health service providers to develop partnership approaches in developing appropriate responses to the needs and issues as identified.
- **Development of local primary health care strategies:** The HSE, local mental health services and local lone parent groups should develop partnership initiatives to address the mental health issues experienced by lone parents at local level.
- **Access to rights and entitlements:** A national initiative is required to ensure that lone parents, and other social welfare claimants, have the necessary knowledge to access their rights and entitlements. This should be developed by OPEN in co-operation with other relevant organisations.

- **Challenging discriminatory attitudes:** Equality and diversity training should be incorporated as core elements in the customer service training for all public servants; practicing public servants should be required to participate in such training. This should be developed in consultation with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups such as lone parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OPEN, TO BE IMPLEMENTED OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS:

The research also generated a number of recommendations for OPEN, to be progressed over the remaining two years of the project:

- **Establish an Implementation Group:** OPEN to put in place an Implementation Group comprised of relevant stakeholders to advance the recommendations from this research, and advise OPEN on its policy development in this area.
- **Put in place a consultation process:** OPEN to develop a membership consultation process, to develop a mental health policy and strategy to implement the policy.
- **Work with member groups to develop models of good practice for community participation in mental health issues facing lone parents:** This process will be documented and distributed to share the learning and good practice, and to ensure that lone parent groups are in a position to develop initiatives with the HSE to address issues affecting lone parents.

These recommendations are currently being progressed, with pilot initiatives already established in Kerry, which is focused on a peer mentoring programme in partnership with local agencies and in the direct provision centre in Mosney, where a lone parent support group has been established and an inter-agency approach is being progressed. Plans are also in train to establish a pilot initiative in Galway.

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THE AUTHORS

Camille Loftus is Head of Policy and Research at OPEN and has responsibility for managing OPEN's policy and research programme, including pro-active policy programmes in the areas of Income Adequacy, Housing & Accommodation, Childcare and Access to Education, Training and Employment.

Camille is author of OPEN's *One Size Fits All?*, an examination of government policy towards lone parents, and *Out of the Traps?* with EAPN (Ireland), which investigated the persistent issue of poverty and unemployment traps.

Prior to joining OPEN, Camille worked with the WRC, Social and Economic Consultants, on equality and labour market issues, and was formerly Welfare to Work Co-ordinator of the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed.

Camille can be contacted at cloftus@oneparent.ie, Tel: 01 814 8860

Gráinne O'Toole is OPEN's Practice to Policy Coordinator. As part of this role, she develops and co-ordinates practice to policy activities in relation to housing and accommodation and ethnic minorities. Grainne had over 12 years' experience in the community sector prior to joining OPEN, and has studied law and worked with local community groups, including lone parent groups, on how communities can best use the law to advance their rights.

Grainne can be contacted at gotoole@oneparent.ie, Tel: 01 814 8860.



OPEN

representing lone parent groups in Ireland

OPEN is the national network of local lone parent self-help groups. We represent one-parent families, particularly those living in, or at risk of living in poverty and we promote their inclusion and progression within wider society.

Our 92 community based groups provide a range of supports and services to 10,000-15,000 one-parent families throughout Ireland. OPEN provides education, training and information with a clear and informed voice on policies affecting one-parent families.

OPEN

National Centre,
7 Red Cow Lane
Smithfield, Dublin 7
Tel: 01 814 8860
Fax: 01 814 8890
www.oneparent.ie