

Lone Parents and Labour Market Barriers in County Cavan

Research Report

Cavan Lone Parents Initiative

2007



Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to all the lone parents who participated in the survey, those who acted as data collectors, steering committee members, the Action Lone Parent Network, community workers, FÁS Community Employment supervisors, childcare providers and staff of OPEN. The project is also grateful to Mari Brunnock who gave support around the design of the questionnaire and supervision of focus groups. We are especially grateful to the NDP Gender Equality Unit in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform for providing both the impetus for the Cavan Lone Parents Initiative and the funding for the research project.

The research was undertaken with funding from the NDP Gender Equality Unit in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The NDP Gender Equality Unit promotes equality between women and men in measures funded under the 2000-2006 National Development Plan (NDP). The Unit assists policy makers to incorporate a gender equality perspective in the development, implementation and evaluation of NDP policies, so that they respond to the needs of both women and men. This process is known as 'gender mainstreaming'. The Unit is funded by the Irish Government and the European Union Structural Funds.



For further information please log onto www.ndpgenderequality.ie

Data Collectors

Jennifer Chetty	Virginia
Catherine Dowling	Ballyconnell
Helen Foy	Cavan Town
Margaret Haire	Belturbet
Margaret Keyes	Cavan Town
Catherine McGrath	Virginia
Ann McHardy	Cavan Town
Tessa Mulligan	Belturbet
Arifa Noshad	Cavan Town
Ann Marie O'Rourke	Ballinagh
Tina Osborne	Virginia
Susan Rudden	Kilnaleck
Una Sweeney	Killeshandra
Patricia Tierney	Ballyjamesduff

Steering Committee Members

Siobhan McEntee (Previous member Marian Duffy)	County Cavan Vocational Education Committee - Adult Education
Gemma Brady	County Cavan Vocational Education Committee - Community Education
Noreen McGovern	Cavan County Childcare Committee
Emer Coveney	Cavan County Council / County Development Board
Una Treanor	Cavan Partnership
Anne Malone	Department of Social & Family Affairs
Marian Sheils	FÁS
Kathleen Sheridan	Health Service Executive - Community Welfare
Ann McHardy	Ma's and Pa's Lone Parents Group
Lorraine McTeigue	South West Cavan Community Development Project
Bernie Brady	Tullacmongan Resource House
Helena Collins	WIN Ireland (Women into the Network)

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the study was to develop a profile of lone parents in County Cavan and in particular to document the barriers they face in seeking to take up education, training or employment opportunities.

The research was funded by the NDP Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. It was managed by a local steering committee made up of statutory agencies, community groups and a lone parent representative.

The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather a range of data. Fourteen lone parents acted as data collectors for the project. They designed a survey and organised 'discussion groups' in different areas of the county. The target group for the research was anyone who had experience of being a lone parent. Lone parents were invited to participate in the research through direct mail, word of mouth, local posters, and media advertisements.

Over a hundred lone parents responded to the survey, the vast majority of whom (97%) were women. Two thirds were aged between 20 and 40. Ten per cent were foreign nationals. Three quarters of respondents had one or two children. Most respondents had children of school going age, while sixteen people had children aged 0-3. Half of the respondents were living in local authority accommodation, and one quarter were owner occupiers. Most were living with their children and not with anyone else, although seventeen people were also living with their parents.

The main findings may be summarised as follows:

Employment and Income

Eleven respondents were in full-time employment and 21 were employed part-time. Forty-two people were not involved in any paid work. There was a high level of welfare dependency with 64 people being in receipt of One Parent Family Payment [OPFP] and seven in receipt of a different welfare payment.

Education Levels

Thirty-eight people left school without completing the Leaving Certificate. Nineteen people said that the Leaving Certificate was their highest level of education. Twenty-four people said they had some third level education but did not complete it. Less than a fifth of the sample had completed a third level course. A quarter of the sample said they had been prevented from finishing education, for example, being taken out of school due to bullying or having to leave for other reasons.

Training Preferences

Most respondents would prefer training to be delivered to them on a part-time basis. More people preferred mornings and evenings rather than afternoons. Few people were interested in full-time training or distance education.

There was a lot of interest in computer-related training of various levels, from basic to advanced. Some people wanted to learn typing, improve their typing speed or to learn office skills such as administration and payroll. Ten people wanted some form of childcare or care work training.

About a third of the respondents did not specify the type of training that would interest them. This may suggest that some lone parents do not have a clear idea of their own training needs or what options are available to them, and therefore may need guidance. In terms of softer skill needs, parenting courses, personal development and programmes to improve self confidence were identified.

The vast majority (86 people or 84%) gave their permission to contact them about any training opportunities. This is a very welcome finding and challenges negative stereotypes about lone parents that suggest they are apathetic to progression.

Employment Goals

Most respondents were interested in pursuing work in the future: 28 wanted unspecified employment, 27 expressed interest in education, teaching or care professions, and 19 people wanted office work. A wide range of other employment interests were identified.

Barriers to Progression

Lack of finance and lack of information were the two largest barriers identified in the survey, followed by childcare issues (availability, affordability and flexibility). Focus group participants also said there was a lack of information about what opportunities were available to them. This related not only to employment options, but to other areas such as health and welfare. Only about a third of the sample had accessed Vocational Education Committee (VEC) services in the past.

Lack of support and low confidence were also common among research participants. Most of the survey respondents (62 people) had access to a car. However 22 people said that transport was a problem for them.

The Experience of Parenting Alone

The social stigma of parenting alone is still an issue in County Cavan. In focus groups, participants spoke about the difficulties of parenting alone and being solely responsible for children, their feelings of guilt, and being in a poverty trap with limited choices. In general, their socialisation opportunities are limited which can lead to isolation. Parents of children with disabilities face additional challenges. Language was an issue for lone parents from minority ethnic communities, who may be further disadvantaged by a lack of family support in Cavan.

Positive aspects of being a lone parent included the enjoyment of parenting and being responsible for decision-making.

Financial Issues and Social Welfare

Household budgeting is difficult for many of the lone parents who participated in this research. They feel that low income lone parents should get greater subsidies for things like TV licence, ESB, telephone line rental, rubbish charges and public transport.

They reported some difficulties in dealing with the Department of Social & Family Affairs such as contacting the Department in Sligo, administrative delays, lack of clarity about how their benefits will be affected by taking up work, and length of time taken for benefits to be reinstated if a job opportunity is later found to be unsuitable.

Accommodation

It is evident from the survey that accommodation is a major source of discontent for low income or welfare dependent lone parents, particularly because they are unable to access loans for home ownership or home improvement. Overcrowding, poor quality housing, cramped conditions, having to move all the time, sub-letting rooms in rented accommodation, length of time on the housing waiting list and restricted choice about where to live were also mentioned.

Summary of Recommendations for National Policy

The following recommendations were developed from the views of lone parents who participated in the study:

Additional childcare subsidies for lone parents and means testing of child benefit and the early childcare supplement.

Childcare and transport costs must be built into education and training programmes for lone parents (at realistic rates).

Service improvements in the Department of Social & Family Affairs including: quicker turnaround on applications for OPFP and general response times, clearer information on the welfare system, promotion of other welfare entitlements e.g. Family Income Supplement, and a guarantee that OPFP can be reinstated quickly if needed.

Supports for lone parents in low paid employment who wish to improve their qualifications (for example waiving or reducing the '12 months on welfare' criteria for Back to Education Allowance [BTEA]).

Consideration to introducing waiver systems or reduced rates for lone parent families in receipt of One Parent Family Payment for services such as telephone, ESB, TV licence, waste charges.

Social inclusion and customer service training should be provided for Community Welfare Officers [CWOs] so that all clients are treated in a respectful manner.

Early diagnoses and supports for children with developmental issues or disability.

Recommendations for Local Policy and Practice

A booklet giving information about local services and entitlements for lone parents.

Information about opportunities for lone parents to be provided in Plain English.

More preventative supports, such as parenting courses, for parents who are having difficulties in the home.

Networking opportunities with other lone parents to combat isolation and share expertise.

Activities to be organised for teenage children to facilitate lone parents to get involved in community structures.

Counselling and career guidance supports.

Local provision of legal advice, for example, on maintenance and access issues.

Employers and Community Employment Projects should submit tax forms in advance so that lone parents do not pay emergency tax when they start a scheme or take up employment.

Locally delivered education and training options for lone parents should:

- Be offered on an outreach basis to lone parents living in rural areas.
- Be delivered in a non-threatening way and offered in terms they will understand.
- Include costs for transport.
- Include costs for childcare for lone parents who require it.
- Be offered in a variety of formats (e.g. online software programmes to develop skills, individual sessions, small groups) as well as through mainstream options.
- Incorporate 'taster' sessions to enable lone parent to sample different types of courses before deciding on an appropriate progression route.

More promotion of VEC services to lone parents including both education options and the Adult Education Guidance Service.

Improvements within the local authority housing system to include:

- Agreements with the Local Authority on housing maintenance issues and response times.
- Shortening the length of time on the housing waiting list.

Introduction

In 2006 Cavan County Development Board [CDB] was awarded funding for research into lone parents and labour market exclusion in County Cavan. The grant was from the NDP Gender Equality Unit in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The Department was concerned about barriers experienced by lone parents in relation to progression to education, training and employment, and about the high rate of poverty among lone parent households.

The purpose of the research was to enquire into the local experience of parenting alone in County Cavan, and in particular what barriers and supports were having an impact on lone parents' ability to progress. The research aimed to develop a broad profile of lone parents in the county with a view to informing service providers of the supports required by people who are parenting alone.

Cavan County Development Board is a structure that comprises many different organisations, including community groups, local development bodies, statutory agencies, elected members and social partners. The CDB process is about ensuring co-ordination of services at local level and effective long-term planning.

A steering committee was established to manage the funding from the Department. This committee was made up of County Development Board member organisations and other groups working with lone parents in the county. These included County Cavan VEC, FÁS, the Department of Social & Family Affairs, Cavan County Childcare Committee, Cavan County Council, Cavan Partnership, Tullacmongan Resource Centre, South West Cavan CDP, Health Service Executive, WIN Ireland, and a lone parent representative from the Ma's and Pa's Group in Cavan town.

Research Method

The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather a range of data. A survey was designed to capture information on the profile of lone parents in the county, their work experience and ambitions, the obstacles they face and the supports available or needed in the county.

Focus groups were set up in different areas of the county. These allowed for a broader discussion of issues that were being documented in the survey. The sessions were also useful in enabling the project to promote education and training opportunities available to lone parents.

The study used a participatory approach in that lone parents were involved in designing the questionnaire, choosing research questions for the focus groups, running the focus groups, and collecting the survey data. They were also involved in the analysis of the data through meetings and opportunities to comment on drafts of the document.

The target group for the research was anyone who had experience of being a lone parent. This included men and women, people who were employed and those who were not involved in any paid work, Irish and foreign nationalities, and lone parents who had children of any age.

Data Collectors

Fourteen lone parents were interested in acting as data collectors for the project. They were identified through a training programme that had been delivered specifically for lone parents in September 2006 by FÁS. All data collectors were women and they came from different areas of the county.

Focus Groups

The location of the focus groups was decided based on the areas that had high numbers of people in receipt of One Parent Family Payments, and in some cases where the data collectors had contacts with other lone parents within their communities. For example, an additional focus group was scheduled for Kilnaleck because one of the data collectors spoke with lone parents in that area who indicated they would be interested in attending a discussion group.

A researcher / trainer was contracted to deliver a workshop to the data collectors on research methods and to supervise the running of the focus groups. The research methods workshop took place in early December 2006. It gave the data collectors an overview of quantitative and qualitative research methods, including ethical issues in conducting research (confidentiality and boundaries) and facilitation skills. Data collectors used the session to develop a series of questions for the research so that each focus group followed the same format. They also practiced role play.

Four focus groups were set up before Christmas 2006 in different areas of the county. A letter was sent by the Department of Social & Family Affairs to people in receipt of One Parent Family Payment to invite them to the focus groups.

However, there was poor attendance at the December sessions ¹, and those involved in the research later felt that the timing (before Christmas) and short notice had affected the turnout. The data collectors also felt that some lone parents might have been reluctant to respond to the invitation because the letter came from the Department of Social & Family Affairs.

The focus groups were rescheduled for February 2007 and greater efforts were made to advertise them. Data collectors placed posters in local venues and promoted the focus groups by word of mouth. An advertisement was placed in *The Anglo Celt* newspaper and the same issue featured an article on the Action Lone Parent Network whose members were involved in the research. One of the data collectors wrote a personal invitation which she hand delivered to lone parents she knew in her own local area. Lone parents who were in receipt of OPFP in the Ballyconnell and Belturbet areas received a letter from the Department of Social and Family Affairs to explain that the December focus group had been rescheduled for February.

Date	Location	Venue	No. of Participants*
11 December 2006	Cavan Town	Farnham Arms Hotel	1
11 December 2006	Bailieborough	The Bailie Hotel	2
12 December 2006	Ballyjamesduff	Cavan County Museum	0
13 December 2006	Ballyconnell	Slieve Russell Hotel	Postponed
15 February 2007	Belturbet	The Railway Station	9
21 February 2007	Kilnaleck	The Realtóg Centre	0
15 February 2007	Ballyjamesduff	Ballyjamesduff Hall	1
19 February 2007	Cavan Town	Tullacmongan Resource Centre	13
Total			26

* Number of participants in addition to the data collectors.
About 4-5 data collectors were also present at each session.

Data collectors took on different roles at each of the focus groups, which were: Organiser, Facilitator, Flip Chart Scribe, Note taker, 'Meet and Greet'. At each one, a Facilitator welcomed people to the session and gave a background to the project. The focus group discussions covered attitudes towards being a lone parent, barriers to progression, goals and aspirations, skills, supports needed to progress, support available in Cavan, future education or training needs. At the end of the discussion, participants were thanked for their time and invited to complete the questionnaire. They were assured that the information would be treated confidentially.

When only a very small number of participants was present, the format of the discussion was informal rather than structured. The focus group in Belturbet had a story-telling session and transport was provided to encourage greater participation.²

¹ Due to poor attendance at the first three scheduled focus groups, the fourth one that was due to take place in Ballyconnell was postponed. A data collector went to the venue on the evening to check if anyone showed up and let them know that the group would be rescheduled.

² One person used the minibus provided and two parents brought children to the storytelling session (four children in total).

Survey

The second part of the research was a survey. The survey was designed and piloted by the data collectors. It included both closed questions with tick box answers and open ended questions that allowed people to give more detail on the form and add their own comments.

The survey also included the name of the data collector and contact details for the project (c/o Cavan County Council).

Data collectors used contacts in their immediate communities to get in touch with other lone parents. FÁS Community Employment Supervisors were asked to inform any CE participants who were lone parents about the survey. This resulted in a number of survey returns.

Some community childcare centres were contacted by the data collectors where they were living in the locality.

People who attended the focus groups were also asked to complete a questionnaire.

Data collectors themselves completed questionnaires because they were also parenting alone.

All surveys were returned to Cavan County Council and information was entered into an Excel database. The VEC took details of lone parents who said they were interested in education or training and who had given their permission to be contacted.

Challenges to the Research

As noted above, there was a low turnout to some of the focus groups.

Data collectors reported that lone parents were often reluctant to return completed questionnaires, even when they were told they could do so anonymously.

The project has found it more difficult to contact lone parents in very isolated rural areas, areas outside of the data collectors' communities, or those not in contact with agencies or community organisations.

The survey has captured more information on the experiences of lone mothers, but the experiences of lone fathers are not adequately documented in this research.

The project did not capture any data on lone parents from the Traveller community.

The study is not based on a representative sample, so findings cannot be generalised to all lone parents in the county. However, the study gives important information on the experiences of lone parents in the sample. The findings have captured information on diverse types of lone parents.

Data Collectors' Experiences

Three of the data collectors described their experiences of being involved in the research process. These experiences demonstrate the difficulties of carrying out research on a sensitive topic and the importance of having links in the community.

I did not have any real problems getting lone parents to complete a questionnaire for the research. I am involved in a lone parent group and so I already had "my audience". I explained to each person, individually, what the research was for and also that there was funding available for training for lone parents, therefore it was going to benefit them. I believe that was an incentive for people to complete the questionnaire and the overall feeling was that it was great something was happening for lone parents at last. Some people were confident enough to complete the questionnaire on their own, while others needed assistance – some asked me to fill it in for them. When it came to the open ended questions I felt some people were holding back and I had to prompt them, e.g. I would rephrase the question, or give examples, in order to get them to provide the correct information.

I also posted out three questionnaires to lone parents I knew, with an accompanying letter about the research - two were returned and these two also attended one of the focus sessions. The other person said she would get it back to me and "it was in the post", but I never received it, and did not pursue it.

Ann McHardy

My experience of the data collection was not as positive as I had first envisaged. On return for collection of the questionnaires very few people were willing to co-operate. It was felt that the information volunteered would be passed on to relevant authorities even though this was clearly explained from the offset that it would not be the case. Despite this a couple of people were willing to volunteer information. Overall in my area unfortunately the data collection was unsuccessful.

Ann Marie O'Rourke

I was met by several varied reactions from lone parents. Some welcomed me and enquired about the nature of the survey, entertaining the questions. Others left me standing at the door, took the questionnaire away from me and on my return either didn't answer the door or told me that they had not filled in the questionnaire. I found that the lone parents were hesitant to divulge their personal information and exhibited an uncertainty about the validity or relevance of the information requested. Generally the lone parents were not comfortable to divulge their information, which could be attributed to factors like their lack of confidence in me as the interviewer, and more importantly, who would have access to the information. Amidst constant reassurance of confidentiality, it was still difficult to convince some of them that the information was required only as a measure of statistics and for the Action network to use as a guide to help develop solutions to the problems faced by lone parents.

Jenny Chetty

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings were documented in discussions that took place at the focus groups. Some qualitative data were also recorded by the survey respondents, many of whom gave detailed written comments on the questionnaires.

The Experience of Parenting Alone

Focus group participants were asked to describe their experience of parenting alone. They talked about the pressure of “having to do everything yourself” and “be both Mother and Father”. Having sole parenting responsibility is physically and emotionally challenging. This dual role means that lone parents do all of the household and caring work, and also heavier jobs around the house. They are both the disciplinarian and the primary care giver. As single parents, they have no one to share worries with and must cope with the stresses of parenting on their own.

Being a lone parent means that children are entirely dependent on them. This is a concern for lone parents, who worry about who would take care of their children if anything were to happen to them, for example, if they had to go to hospital. Would their grandparents or Godparents step in? They would have to rely on other family members to help out. Many people openly admitted to a feeling of isolation, being alone, and even times of depression.

In addition to carrying a dual role, lone parents have to contend with a range of other issues. One survey respondent commented: “To my mind the issues facing lone parents are predominantly social issues, including a lack of efficient support services, lack of understanding around their needs, blame instead of positive actions and bad press”.

Participants reported that parents were often disappointed when they did not bow to pressure and marry the father of the child. The lack of a marriage certificate and birth certificate anomalies caused problems also. They recognised that attitudes towards lone parenting today are not as negative as they used to be. However, there remains a social stigma about parenting alone in County Cavan. Lone parents perceive that other people are prejudiced against them, and that they receive different treatment from other people, especially those who are better off. Some participants felt that Community Welfare Officers did not treat them respectfully.

In terms of social attitudes towards lone parents, participants felt that lone parents with small children suffered greater censure, and that lone parents whose children were older did not experience the same stigma. Lone parents with small children and young lone parents experience more difficulty in general than those whose children were grown up.

Participants also felt that young children did not understand why one parent was absent, and tended to blame themselves. Women lone parents felt that young children sometimes blamed them for their father’s absence. They find it difficult when children ask ‘why can’t I see him?’ about their father. There can be feelings of guilt about this. In contrast, older children were better able to understand why they were in a one parent family.

Participants talked about feeling 'boxed in' and being in a poverty trap with limited choices. Other lone parents who were foreign nationals felt that language was a barrier and they were further disadvantaged by a lack of family support here in Cavan. Foreign nationals and those with no family support or poor English language skills have much more difficulty with Community Welfare Officers and other agencies.

For some lone parents, socialisation opportunities are limited. Individuals reported feeling intrusive if they go out with their married friends. Being on their own, they have no one to share the driving with on a night out which also curtailed socialising.

One focus group participant whose child has Downs Syndrome said that she found it very difficult to cope. In another case, a survey respondent whose child has Asperger's Syndrome described the difficulties she experienced in accessing support services:

"In my case my son has Asperger's Syndrome and therefore has special needs. Catering for this adequately during his early years was impossible as he only received diagnosis at age nine. I have been very fortunate in the people I have met, childminders and friends, and eventually schooling. These support systems are essential to any lone parent. However, my son is almost an adult and I have to cope with his particular needs by myself and communicate these with people who were involved in his up-bringing. This has worked for me to an extent but my son has missed out on gaining access to the appropriate support at key stages in his development and is now struggling to cope in his teens... Today, due to a lot of media coverage of Asperger's... there is much greater awareness about his condition. However, practical care services have still not progressed. Schools find they have to plug the chasms left by our poor health care system..."

Accommodation was a huge area of discontent, and if not a specific barrier to progression, at least a factor that introduced further stress into their lives. Written comments on the surveys went into detail about poor quality accommodation, lack of choice about where to live, and frustration for those who could not afford their own homes.

Data collectors also recorded accounts of difficult situations that some parents are in. They heard these accounts during the data collection process, where they met other lone parents. One example was given of a lone parent who works six days a week and keeps her adult children (both in their twenties) who live at home. The children expect her to stay home and take care of them and are verbally abusive to her. The data collector who met with her felt that this mother needed support and help to raise her confidence levels in order to be able to deal with the issue.

Facilitators at the focus groups also prompted participants to consider the positive aspects of parenting alone. They were asked to be aware of their hidden strengths including their ability to act alone, to cope, and to be independent. Lone parents in the focus groups had many skills, such as multi-tasking, time management, communicating, budgeting, sewing, typing and even singing! But many do not recognise these as skills.

Some participants agreed that parenting alone can make a person stronger. They enjoyed being parents and being responsible for decision making. They noted other positive aspects of being a single parent, such as 'you're not arguing with people' and 'there's no vying for attention'.

Financial Issues and Social Welfare

Household budgeting is difficult for many of the lone parent who participated in this research, including both routine expenses, and unplanned expenses that often arise for school-going children. One woman reporting having to pay €60 recently to a dentist to have her child's tooth filled.

They believe that the system of welfare supports is unfair to lone parents. For example, disabled people get free TV licence and free ESB and telephone line rental, but lone parents do not get these supports. They suggested that items such as TV licences, waste charges, etc. should be offered at reduced rates for people who are on low income and parenting alone. The coal allowance does not cover the amount of fuel they have to buy every week and it finishes in April, which was considered too early.

The Government childcare subsidy of €1,000 is paid to every family with children, but it is not means tested. Lone parents in this research felt that this is unfair and that it should be means tested. They also proposed that child benefit should be means tested; people with greater needs should get more than those who are well off. Senior staff in the civil service and others on good salaries receive the same child benefit and childcare allowance as low income lone parents, but lone parents on a welfare payment are in greater need of it. They felt that through these systems, the Government is creating poverty and maintaining exclusion.

Fathers are generally not paying maintenance but if they do, the OPFP is reduced. It is too difficult to change the payment. They said that having to phone the Department of Social and Family Affairs office in Sligo is time consuming because it is difficult to get through on the phone. Even getting a letter to prove they are lone parents in order to do a course can take months. The data collectors cited administrative problems with agencies that affected their personal finances. One person waited six months for her One Parent Family Payment to come through.

Financial considerations can impact on other decisions, for example, the age at which a lone parent sends his or her child to school. Because childcare is expensive, the temptation is there to send the child to school early. This is not always in the best interests of the child.

Being under financial strain can create stress; lone parents are constantly having to budget and are unable to afford as many things as they would like. Some participants reported feeling angry with themselves for not being able to provide properly for their families.

They are vulnerable to both the temptation and pressure to take a loan, but at the same time the idea of borrowing money frightens them, especially from unofficial moneylenders ('loan sharks'). In this sample, lone parents feel that banks and official loan sources are prejudiced against them. They are often not eligible for loans for home improvements or mortgages because of their income level. Social welfare is not regarded as an income by lending institutions.

The welfare they receive is insufficient and even when they engage in paid work, they described money as going 'in one hand and out the other'. Meeting costs such as taxi fares to hospital appointments really eats into their income. It is difficult for them to increase their income; if they receive maintenance from the child's other parent, then the social welfare payment is reduced.

Many lone parents are not aware of entitlements that would boost their income, such as Family Income Supplement. When changes are made to the One Parent Family Payment, a letter is sent to recipients from the Department of Social & Family Affairs to let them know about the changes. Recently this letter was accompanied by a brochure that had information about Family Income Supplement. The data collectors felt that information on their entitlements was slowly improving and that this was a welcome change.

They discussed being wary of taking paid work, not just because of the immediate loss of benefits, but also because they know it is not easy or quick to get the benefits reinstated. One woman said: "It becomes really scary to do anything that will stop the lone parent payment, because it is so difficult to get it back." If the job does not work out, they fear that it could take months for them to access the welfare payment again.

Barriers to Progression

Barriers to future progression included having to look after older relatives and difficulties accessing childcare. These care responsibilities prevent lone parents from seeking work, or from furthering their education or up-skilling. Those who are looking after elderly people are tied to the home. And because they are at home, other people and family members begin to expect them to do tasks for them. Lone parents who are at home with their children can therefore be seen as a support for the extended family network. Lone parents find it difficult to take any time out for themselves because of these responsibilities.

Lack of confidence was cited as an effect of being out of work for sometime. Other lone parents felt they were 'too old' to get a new job. It is hard to 'dive back into the workforce'. Motivation was also an issue.

Data collectors spoke of lone parents having a 'mental block' about going back to education. Some respondents set their expectations very low and said things like: "All I could do is clean".

The lack of transport in rural areas was also cited. Some participants said that they were not able to drive or did not own a car. One survey respondent had access to a car, but only until the insurance runs out as it would be too expensive for her to re-insure it.

At the focus sessions, participants articulated the view that getting a job is not a suitable option for every lone parent. Other issues should be considered, such as the ages of their children. They felt that being a mother is the most important job (most of the focus group participants were women). Mothers can feel guilty about leaving their children in care.

Financial issues were listed as a barrier; participants noted that they had to stick to a budget and found it hard to cope financially. Money is a barrier to progression because it plays a central role in enabling lone parents to access training, childcare, and transport.

Childcare is a very obvious barrier for lone parents wishing to progress. Not being able to find suitable childcare, and the high costs involved, were ongoing themes. Lack of affordable childcare holds back the younger generation of lone parents in particular. Until children go to school, it is very difficult for single parents to afford childcare. This issue was raised frequently in the discussions. The cost of childcare in County Cavan is about €135 per week and €8 per day for playschool. Parents have to pay the childcare centre for a full week even if the child is sick. School holidays are long and teachers have many days off for training, which makes it difficult for lone parents to take regular employment.

Past experiences of the education system were another reason why some people found it hard to progress. One woman recounted her experiences of school. She had a health problem which the teachers did not understand. She said that a particular teacher made her life a 'misery' and as a result her parents took her out of school. Lone parents in the focus groups were generally literate, but some were uncomfortable with the idea of doing paperwork, which might affect how they feel about returning to education or training.

One participant felt that an employer had discriminated against her because she was a lone parent. She attended an interview but believed that the potential employer took her lone parent status into consideration and as a result she did not get the job.

Focus group participants also said there was a lack of information about what opportunities were available to them. This related not only to employment options, but to other areas such as health – the feeling that they “don't know who to go to” in order to get answers. They need advice from the Department of Social & Family Affairs about how returning to work will affect their benefits. They need advice on the medical card, rent allowance and working. One participant at a focus group gained employment but ended up owing money to the Department as she did not know she had to report earnings. Lone parents want clear information on what the incentive is for returning to work.

Some reported feeling that they were on a plateau and said they were unsure of which direction to follow. When lone parents want to change to a different area of work, they find it hard to make this change. Information provision is essential here to let people know about opportunities available to them.

Overall there was a sense in the focus groups that lone parents have to juggle many different roles and workloads. Their lives are busy and they have to manage fit many things in. Most were interested in finding out about opportunities open to them and wanted to hear more about the Cavan Lone Parents Initiative.

Progression Goals

In the focus groups, many lone parents acknowledged that having some form of employment or occupation outside of the home was beneficial both to themselves and to their children. One person said: "It's better for children if you have something going on in your own life". They recognised that staying at home full-time is not always good for a person's self esteem, and it might even mean that children are isolated.

However, people did not feel that full-time work was necessarily the best option for everyone. One participant commented that she was quite happy juggling between being a mother and part-time work, saying: "It's good to be able to achieve a nice balance."

An important goal for lone parents is to make their children's lives better. Some lone parents would like to start a course but are not really sure of their goals or aspirations. Some had been on courses previously and found that it gave them a boost. They would consider any training that would enable them to become financially independent.

At some focus sessions, participants had not previously considered any long term goals. They found a great benefit in meeting other people in similar circumstances and said that this had helped them to focus on the future.

A lot of people at the focus groups were interested in learning computer skills. There was some interest in caring work and some interest in working in childcare. Work related skills they would like to develop included customer care and office administration. Others just wanted general skills that would help them to get a job. Further skills they would like to develop included raising self-esteem, personal development, learning to be comfortable around people, literacy skills and mind mapping NLP (Neuro-Lingustic Programming), i.e. the way we think, feel and see.

Going back to education was raised as an option but the participants worried about the loss of their One Parent Family Payment. Some of the focus group participants aspired to getting third level degrees, but wondered how they would manage this financially.

Supports Required

Lone parents who participated in this research were very clear about the supports they require to progress into the labour market and to bring about real social inclusion for this target group.

Firstly, they noted that relevant agencies need to work together to assist lone parents to progress. Lone parents also have much to offer to each other as a group and can give support to one another.

One of their most basic needs is for accurate information. They suggested a booklet written for and by lone parents that would address queries about services and entitlements, support options and other relevant information. The difficulties in accessing information presently and the abundance of 'red tape' and lack of 'Plain English' were cited as reasons why such a booklet was badly needed.

Other recommendations were for a more active role for agency representatives like Social Welfare Officers and Community Welfare Officers. Lone parents need information on how taking up employment will affect them in terms of rent allowance and other issues. At the moment, they feel that nothing is clear to them until the benefits are taken away. Entitlements should be clearly explained.

More preventative supports are needed for parents who are having difficulties in the home. Social services are only there when things reach a crisis or when the parent has lost control of the child (for example, when the child is using drugs or involved in anti social behaviour). In such cases social workers are available to give support. But there is no such support available to prevent this happening.

Parents would like support with positive parenting techniques. Lone parents would benefit from a service where someone could give them support particularly around parenting teenage children. Dealing with teenagers and setting boundaries for children were mentioned frequently. This issue was noted by the focus group participants, the survey participants and the data collectors themselves.

Lone parents who participated in the focus groups reported feeling isolated and some suggested a need for a parenting support group. Children of lone parent families may also feel isolated or perceive their family as different to other families, and it would be nice for them to meet children in the same situation.

One survey respondent said: “I would also like to access a course on parenting and the issues facing parenting in difficult circumstances, and a course that will teach me how to do my child’s homework with her” while another said that she “would like advice on parenting teenagers”.

Supports in this area could include a programme to build self-esteem in teenagers. The OPEN ¹ Training Programme ‘Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities’ covers positive parenting and is aimed at building self confidence within the child. At the time of writing, the first of these programmes in Ireland is being piloted in Cavan.

Another issue relevant to parenting is that lone parents who were involved in the research would like to attend network meetings, but are anxious about leaving their teenage children alone. Babysitters can be arranged for younger children but teenage children do not want anyone looking after them. Lone parents who took part in the research wanted to know if some activities could be organised for teenagers at the same time as events for lone parents.

Counselling supports may be required by some lone parents. Opportunities to talk with and get advice from others who have similar issues would be welcome.

Career guidance supports are available locally through the Adult Education Guidance Information Service in the VEC, but many lone parents involved in this research were not aware of the service or where they could get information.

¹ One Parent Exchange and Network, a national network of local lone parent self-help groups.

Lone parents need more of a subsidy for childcare. It was reported that in the UK, lone parents get a year's free childcare before the child goes to school. A similar model could be explored here.

'Taster' sessions of a few courses could be offered to people who are unsure what area they would like to pursue. Taster subjects that were suggested were glass work, electronics and computers.

Specific training courses should be arranged to help those who want to change career direction. One person at a focus group had waitressing and retail experience but would prefer a different type of work and was unsure how to make this transition.

In terms of training delivery, morning and evening choices are needed. They need to be given plenty of notice about classes or meetings. Childcare costs must be built into training programmes. Some people require literacy support. People who participated on the modified 'Pathways' courses delivered by FÁS and the Cavan Lone Parents Initiative in September 2006 spoke highly of it and felt it has benefited them. One survey respondent said "Now that I have done this course it has truly helped me move on and believe in myself to make a career for me and my daughter to go somewhere".

Lone parents see the benefit of being linked together for self support and group support. They felt that there were skills within the broader group of people parenting alone that could be shared, for example, older parents could help younger ones with advice on parenting teenagers. In addition, lone parents often feel more confident to address issues or attend training in a group setting, particularly if they have been out of work for a while.

Getting legal advice on issues of access and maintenance is another need. Some lone parents have to go to court over access issues and they need support around this.

Participants acknowledged that a range of supports are already available in County Cavan. They cited the Citizens Information Service as being helpful and some had used MABS for household budgeting. The Post Office can also set up a budgeting arrangement for bills, rent, etc. School Transport is affordable. The VEC runs ESOL courses for foreign nationals, which would help lone parents from minority ethnic communities who are learning English.

Case Study

This case study is about the experience of one lone parent who completed training with the Cavan Lone Parents Initiative in September 2006. It describes the difficulties she faced when trying to find work and increase her income.

Her One Parent Family Payment had initially been reduced because she was due to get a maintenance payment from her child's father. This was paid through the courts but there was often a delay. For example, one payment was due to her in November but was not actually paid until the following March.

She was offered a Community Employment Scheme in Cavan town in April 2007. As she has a pre-school aged child, she needed to find childcare immediately so that she could accept the CE position. The first three childcare facilities she tried could only put her child's name on a waiting list, with a provisional start date in September. Every childcare facility she contacted was at full capacity. She heard about one other childcare centre, and they were able to offer her a full-time childcare place, but they had no options around providing a part-time place, which would have suited her CE hours better. The full-time childcare place costs her €150 per week.

Because she was going on the CE scheme, she had to send information about the maintenance payment and the CE position to the Department of Social & Family Affairs, and as a result her One Parent Family Payment will be further reduced. It was €195 per week and is being reduced to €145 per week.

When she started on the CE scheme, she was put on emergency tax for the first four weeks, which meant that her take-home pay was lower than expected. Also, there is some travel involved in her work with the CE Project and although these expenses will be reimbursed to her, they are not paid immediately. Both of these issues mean that her weekly income is reduced until she is refunded the money that is owed to her. This presents difficulties for managing the household budget. She made the point that she has to pay her childcare fees and other bills on time, even if money due to her is paid late.

Another point she raised is that Family Income Supplement is not available to people on CE schemes. Her friend is working part-time hours in a regular job and is able to claim FIS, and as a result her friend is better off. She described her experience of moving into work by saying: "It all hits you together. Fair enough I got the job, but then I had to go looking for childcare and pay full whack. I don't see the difference between work on a CE scheme and a job except that the CE scheme is paid less. I think that lone parents on CE should be entitled to Family Income Supplement."

Summary of Qualitative Data

Lone parents who participated in the discussion groups feel very alone with the heavy sole responsibility of childcare. They feel prejudiced against by banks, when they apply for either a loan or a mortgage on the basis of their lone parents allowance. They also feel that information is not always easily accessible to them or easily understood. Childcare costs and the lack of transport make attending courses at regular times a problem. However they welcome the chance to meet together and focus on options for the future. Many are interested in education and training as a means of improving the quality of life for themselves and their children.

Quantitative Findings

In total, 102 lone parents responded to the survey. This was considered a good response rate because local agencies have traditionally found it difficult to engage with lone parents to find out about their needs.

Gender, Age, Nationality

The vast majority of lone parents who responded to the survey were women. Three surveys were returned by men.

Sex	Number of Respondents
Female	99
Male	3
Total	102

In Ireland, the majority of people who are parenting alone are female. However, this study had a particularly high response from female lone parents. The fact that all the data collectors were women may have been influential, as data collectors later noted that they found it easier to approach a female lone parent than a male lone parent.

Age	Number of Respondents
Under 20	1
In their 20s	24
In their 30s	22
In their 40s	20
In their 50s	7
Didn't answer	28
Total	102

The study captured a broad age range of lone parents in County Cavan, with surveys from people aged from 17 to 57. Every decade in between was represented.

Twenty-eight people did not answer this question. Some people may have been reluctant to give their age.

Most survey respondents were Irish but there were 11 people of other nationalities. These data on the diversity of lone parents are considered valuable, because the project is seeking an understanding of the barriers facing different types of lone parents.

Nationality	Number of Respondents
Irish	81
English / British	5
Pakistani	2
Scottish	2
South African	2
Didn't answer	10
Total	102

It is likely that respondents who did not indicate their nationality were Irish. Data collectors felt that respondents who were of foreign nationality would have indicated their nationality on the form.

Number and Ages of Children

Between them survey respondents had 193 children. Three quarters of respondents had one or two children.

Number of Children	Number of Respondents
1 child	50
2 child	26
3 child	12
4 child	6
5 child	2
6 + child	3
Didn't answer	3
Total	102

The socio-economic exclusion of lone parents impacts directly on lone parents themselves, but it also has a knock-on effect on their children. If lone parents are excluded from the labour market and as a result are at risk of poverty, this will affect their dependants. Supporting lone parents to progress will have a positive outcome for child poverty and on the life choices of their children.

Most lone parents who responded to the survey had children of school going age. Sixteen had children who were aged 0-3 and six had children who were aged 18 and over.

Accommodation and Household Structure

About half of the respondents were living in local authority accommodation.

Accommodation Type	Number of Respondents
Local Authority	50
Own Home*	27
Private Rented	15
Other	2
Didn't answer	8
Total	102

*This included respondents who said they were living in the family home and in one case a mobile home.

Survey respondents went into detail about housing issues that were problematic for them. This included criticisms of local authority housing. One respondent, who had a young daughter, wrote: "I'm in a two bedroom house and it's damp and I'm not entitled to a bigger house. My child needs a bigger room as she can't invite friends to stay over or even family."

Further details of accommodation issues are listed in Appendix I.

Household Structure	Number of Respondents
Living on own / with children	36
Living with parent or parents	17
Living on own without children	1
Other	7
Didn't answer	41
Total	102

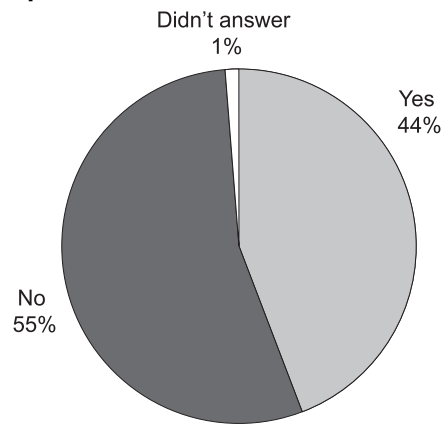
Most lone parents who answered this question were living with their children and not with anyone else. Seventeen people were living with their parents. One father was living on his own without his children.

A large number of respondents (41) did not answer this particular question. This may have been due to the layout of questionnaire.

The survey asked if respondents believed that being a lone parent had affected their accommodation options.

Has being a lone parent affected your accommodation options?

Less than half of the respondents felt that being a lone parent had affected their accommodation options.



Some respondents felt that being a lone parent affected their accommodation options in a positive way. One person said "...if I didn't have [child], I wouldn't have a Council house." Another respondent to the same question replied: "Not in a negative way. There is more availability of local authority accommodation in country areas. I rented for a year and a half but am in local authority accommodation now and am very happy with it."

However, most comments emphasised the fact that lone parents find it difficult to get a mortgage to buy their own house: "Not able to afford to buy own house on one income."

Overcrowding, cramped conditions, having to move all the time, sub-letting rooms in rented accommodation, length of time on the housing waiting list and restricted choice about where to live were also mentioned. For many, accommodation appears to be a stressful topic.

Current Work and Income

Eleven of the survey respondents were in full-time employment. Twenty-one were in part-time employment and 16 were on FÁS programmes. Forty-two respondents were not involved in any paid work.

Work Status	Number of Respondents
Not in paid work / homemaker / on disability / carer	42
Employed full-time	11
Employed part-time	21
Self-employed	3
FÁS CE Scheme / Jobs Initiative	16
Other	3
Student	3
FÁS Scheme and part time employment	1
Didn't answer	2
Total	102

Lone parents often prefer part-time work as it offers greater flexibility. It was not surprising that only eleven respondents were in full-time work because lone parents are parenting and working around the needs of their children.

Sources of Income	Number of Respondents
One Parent Family Payment	64
Community Employment/Jobs Initiative / Training Allowance	19
Disability welfare payment	7
Paid employment	31
Other welfare payment (e.g. Carer's, Widow's)	7
Blank	2
Other	3

(Note: Respondents could indicate more than one source of income)

Some other sources of income were listed such as Family Income Supplement, grants and child benefit.

Education and Training

Respondents had different levels of education. Ten respondents had primary education only or no formal education. Twenty-eight people had some secondary level education. So over a third of respondents (38 people) had left school before finishing the senior cycle.

Nineteen people said that the Leaving Certificate was their highest level of education. Twenty-four people said they had some third level education but did not complete it. And 19 people out of 102 had completed a third level education (less than a fifth).

Highest Education Level	Number of Respondents
Primary / None	10
Some Secondary	28
Leaving Certificate	19
Some Third Level	24
Completed Third Level	19
Commercial course	1
Didn't answer	1
Total	102

This table shows that many people (24) were able to access third level education but were unable to complete it. Data collectors commented on how hard it is to be a parent and to study at the same time. In some cases, having a child might have been the reason that respondents had to leave college.

Some data collectors called door to door for the survey, approaching lone parents they knew in their communities. Lack of confidence among the lone parents they met was a major issue. They described some of the lone parents they met as being 'stuck in a rut'. Those in low paid employment rely on the extra bit of money; it becomes a lifeline for them. They would find it difficult to give it up in order to pursue further training. Data collectors also spoke of lone parents having a 'mental block' about going back to education.

Several respondents indicated that they had completed the National College of Ireland accredited Parents in Education course; one person described this as 'a great help'.

Prevented from Finishing Education

Prevented from Finishing Education	Number of Respondents
Yes	25
No	67
Blank	10
Total	102

Twenty-five people said they felt they had been prevented from finishing education. Some comments included:

- “Parents took me out of school because I was being bullied.”
- “Being a member of a large family I did not get the opportunity to finish my education.”
- “I did not complete course due to my father’s illness.”
- “I would have liked to go to university, but financial issues and lack of a car prevented me. I found distance education isolating.”

Additional comments on this question are presented in Appendix II.

Most people however, did not feel they had been prevented from finishing their education. This finding is somewhat surprising given the many of the respondents had not completed second or third level education. Perhaps respondents felt it was their choice to leave education, or perhaps some had low expectations for their own educational attainment.

Preference for Training Provision

Most survey respondents would prefer training to be delivered to them on a part-time basis. More people preferred mornings and evenings rather than afternoons. Few people were interested in full-time training or distance education. Locally based training was also a popular choice.

Preference for Training	Number of Respondents
Part-time	61
Mornings	41
Evenings	33
Locally based	30
Full-time	9
Afternoons	7
Distance education	7
Other	3

The popularity of mornings and part-time training is likely to be due to the fact that this suits the available hours of lone parents with school-going children.

Training Requirements

The survey asked lone parents about the types of education and training they would be interested in starting. There was a lot of interest in computer-related training of various levels, from basic to advanced. The European Computer Driving Licence course was mentioned frequently. Some people wanted to learn typing or to improve their typing speed.

Ten people wanted some form of childcare or care work training, with some requesting training for working with children who have special needs. Interest in childcare was felt to be because hours are suitable.

About a third of the respondents either did not specify the type of training that would interest them, or left that question blank. Data collectors said that, when they were collecting the survey data, respondents made comments such as “What am I supposed to write in this box?”. This suggests that some lone parents do not have a clear idea of their own training needs or what options are available to them.

There was a low level of interest among survey respondents in personal development courses, although this issue came up more frequently in the focus group discussions.

Training Needed	Number of Respondents
Computers of different levels and typing	28
Childcare, Care Work, Special Needs	10
Third level	13
Basic or Return to Education course	3
None or Not applicable	9
Office (admin, reception, payroll)	7
Work experience	3
Personal development	2
Unspecified but training needed	2
Blank	31
Other	9

In addition to the above, desirable training listed included:

- Security skills
- Public Relations (x2)
- Counselling qualification
- Carer's course (x 2)
- Pre apprenticeship / training in trades
- Fitness instructor
- Social Studies, English and Maths FETAC
- Management
- Accountancy
- Book keeping for business and business planning
- Communication skills

Future Aims

The survey asked respondents to indicate what options they would like to pursue in the future. Twenty-eight people stated they wanted either full-time or part-time employment, but did not specify in what area. Twenty-seven said they were interested in working in the education, teaching or care professions. The next largest number wanted to work in an office environment or with computers. Fifteen people wanted to pursue self employment.

Thirteen people said they would like to do community and voluntary work. Often people said they would like paid employment as well as being interested in community and voluntary work.

Sixteen people either did not respond to this question or had not considered their future aims.

Sixteen people wanted to pursue other areas of work and these were very diverse: security, management, facilitation, lorry driving, music, hairdressing, psychotherapy, design, fitness instructor, counselling, trade, and running a public house. This further indicates the diversity of lone parents, who have very different work backgrounds and future ambitions.

What options would you like to pursue in the future?	Number of Respondents
Employment (not specified)	28
Childcare / care / teaching / nursing	27
Office work / computers / administration	19
Other	16
Self employment	15
Have not considered future aims	13
Community & voluntary work	13
Blank	3

Note: Respondents to this question could indicate more than one answer.

Respondents were asked to indicate the factors that influenced their future aims and ambitions. Twenty-three people said that their aims were influenced by their experience of working. Fifteen people said they were financially motivated. Eleven people chose options based on previous experience of education or training and nine people said they had a personal interest in their chosen area.

Other factors that influenced their decisions included wanting to ‘keep busy’, recognising that they needed more skills, wanting ‘More control of own life’, getting encouragement from their CE Scheme, having care responsibilities, seeking more flexibility in work (e.g. freelance or self employment), responding to an identified need in the community for a service, and motivation to provide for family. One person felt more confident to pursue her aims since she had obtained literacy support: “Now that I am getting help reading and writing I would like to go on and do my Junior Certificate.” In one case a woman stated that lack of confidence meant she had not considered her future aims and that she felt there was no incentive to pursue any aims.

Access to Service Providers

The majority of lone parents who responded to the survey had accessed service providers such as the Department of Social & Family Affairs, FÁS, General Practitioners, Citizens Information and the Community Welfare Service.

Fewer people had accessed the services of the VEC, Cavan Resource Centre, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, MABs, Cavan Partnership or a local community group.

A discussion about this finding with data collectors suggested that community spirit is weak in some parts of Cavan, and people are not engaging with community groups. Community groups are perceived as closed. A family resource centre in Cavan town held an AGM recently and invited 500 households in the locality. Eight people turned up. Data collectors reported a sense in the community that nobody knows anyone in their area anymore.

Have you ever accessed any of the following providers?	Number of Respondents
Department of Social & Family Affairs	79
FÁS	71
General Practitioners	69
Citizens Information Service	62
Community Welfare Officer	61
County Cavan VEC	33
Cavan Resource Centre	27
St. Vincent de Paul	24
MABS	22
Cavan Partnership	22
Local Community Group	16

Barriers to Progression

Lack of finance and lack of information were the two largest barriers, followed by childcare issues. Lack of support and low confidence were also common.

Barriers	Number of Respondents
Lack of finance	63
Lack of information	42
Childcare	40
Lack of support	38
Lack of confidence	36
Health issues	18
Family issues	13
Other care responsibilities	10
Problems in the home	10
Other	8
Literacy issues	6
Difficulty with English language	1

Data collectors felt that the actual numbers of people who experience these types of barriers could be higher but respondents might not want to disclose that they have particular problems.

Other barriers listed by the survey respondents were:

- *“Six children to look after. Guilt, can’t be two parents no matter how hard I try”.*
- *“I have a son at home I need to care for him.”*
- *“Totally on my own. My mother lives in Clare. [Child’s] father lives in Dublin. I never get a break.”*
- *“Child with a disability.”*
- *“Sometimes hard to access [information] on the phone i.e. social welfare”*
- *“I have limited time on my hands, 9.30 am to 1.30 pm Monday to Friday. I am the sole carer to my children.”*

Health issues were particularly highlighted:

- *“I have severe health problems and know I will not be able to work again.”*
- *“I have heart problems and tend to take each day as it comes. I have never gave my future much thought workwise but would like to take part in training to widen my options.”*
- *“Have epilepsy. I need an alarm, have to rely on my son if I take a fit. Can only do certain jobs.”*

See Appendix III for more detail on the barriers to progression that were documented in the survey.

Transport

Most of the respondents (62 people) had access to a car. However 22 people said that transport was a problem for them. Given the rural nature of County Cavan, this finding suggests that about a quarter of the sample would experience transport issues as a barrier in seeking to take up employment.

See Appendix IV for respondents' comments on transport barriers.

Permission to Contact about Training

The vast majority (86 people or 84%) gave their permission to contact them about any training opportunities.

This is a very welcome finding and challenges traditional stereotypes about lone parents that link them with welfare dependency.

Conclusion and Recommendations

People who are parenting alone in County Cavan are a diverse group. They are different ages, with different educational backgrounds, and involved in different types of work, both paid and unpaid. Their children are different ages and have different needs. This study captured information on lone parents living in County Cavan who have come from other countries. It has documented information from both male and female lone parents.

This research has found some common themes, such as lack of information as a barrier to progression.

Most of the respondents in this sample have children of school going age, so childcare is not necessarily the biggest barrier, particularly if flexible and part-time education, training and employment options are available.

One issue from the research was that, traditionally, there have been few networking opportunities for lone parents in the county. These have started to develop in recent years.

A number of recommendations are put forward to support lone parents in the county. These proposed actions could usefully inform the work of local development and statutory services, community and voluntary organisation working with lone parents, and networks of lone parents.

They can be summarised as follows on page 27.

Recommendations for National Policy Makers

Affordability of Childcare

Lone parents in this study feel that the current system of paying an equal amount of childcare support to every parent is unfair to low income lone parent families. They are critical of the fact that neither Child Benefit nor the Early Childcare Supplement is means tested. They find childcare costs very high, even in community-run childcare facilities that are grant aided by the Office of the Minister for Children. Lone parents participating in this research reported childcare costs of up to €150 per week. This is very expensive for someone moving from welfare to part-time employment.

- Lone parents should receive additional subsidies towards childcare to enable their progression.⁴
- The government should explore ways of further subsidising childcare places for lone parents who are making the transition to the workforce.

Availability of Childcare

In County Cavan lone parents find it difficult to access a childcare place in a facility. Community childcare facilities are required to operate a tiered payment system and usually have a number of places for parents from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there are no specific childcare places for lone parents.

- Review the requirements on community-run childcare facilities to reserve a set number/percentage of places for lone parents with a view to increasing the availability of childcare specifically for lone parents.

Cost of Living

Findings from this study indicate that many lone parent families are under considerable financial strain. Data collectors involved in the analysis of the findings believed that lone parents should qualify for waivers or reduced rates for important services.

- Consideration to introducing waiver systems or reduced rates for lone parent families in receipt of OPFP for services such as telephone, ESB, TV licence, public transport.
- The coal allowance paid by the Department of Social & Family Affairs should be continued past April / be weather dependent.

⁴ At the time of writing, the Office of the Minister for Children has announced details of a new programme called the NCIP Community Childcare Subvention Scheme. Under this scheme, disadvantaged parents in receipt of social welfare payments or engaged in education, training or work experience programmes where an underlying entitlement to a social welfare payment is established, and those in receipt of FIS, will be able to avail of reduced childcare fees in community-based childcare facilities. Cavan County Childcare Committee notes that while this is welcome news for low income parents, it may have a detrimental overall impact on community childcare services in the county, as it replaces the former staffing grants. In parts of the county where only a small number of parents are in receipt of welfare payments, the cost of childcare will have to rise significantly to cover staff costs.

Costs Involved in Progressing

It is a huge boost to a lone parent when s/he manages to get an interview for a job or manages to secure employment. However, lone parents can be at a disadvantage if they do not have much money to spare; the cost of buying clothes suitable to wear to an interview can leave them in financial difficulty.

- A specific allowance towards this cost would alleviate a lot of pressure.
- More information to be provided to lone parents if this type of support is available through the Community Welfare Office.

Lack of Information

Lone parents want to be able to understand in advance how their welfare payment and secondary benefits will be affected if they take up education, training or employment opportunities. The Department of Social & Family Affairs provides information to lone parents informing them of earnings limit, impact on benefits in the form of booklets etc. However, this information needs to be made more accessible, because lone parents in this local study continue to find the system complicated and often feel unable to predict how progression will affect their benefits.

- Local promotion of the Lo Call telephone number that is available for lone parents who have enquiries about the social welfare system.
- Delivery of peer support by lone parents who have familiarity with the welfare system and can inform other lone parents of their options. Motivational and information support.
- Extension of the Social and Family Support Service to improve access to local social welfare officers so lone parents can discuss their options before making a decision.
- Enhance awareness of the Citizens Information Service, which also provides information support in this area.

Lone parents are not always aware of their entitlements and they should be addressed with the appropriate information.

- Promotion of welfare entitlements e.g. inform lone parents if they are eligible for FIS or other payments.

Issues within Administrative Systems

Lone parents in this study reported some issues in dealing with the Department of Social & Family Affairs in Sligo. This related to difficulties in getting through to the office, length of time to receive a letter from the Department, and administrative delays in processing applications. The Department of Social & Family Affairs acknowledges that this is an issue and that steps are being taken to address the problem.

Recommendations with this area are as follows:

- Quicker turnaround on applications for OPFP.
- Improve response times for written communication.
- Enhance communication between the Department and those in receipt of OPFP.

One of the issues facing lone parents who wish to progress to employment is the worry about the length of time required to access a welfare payment, should they take up employment and later find it unsuitable. The fact that lone parents will be dealt with by the local office rather than the central department should speed up the process.

- The Department of Social & Family Affairs should be able to guarantee people who are moving from welfare dependency to employment that their social welfare payment will be reinstated quickly if necessary.

Some lone parents feel they are not treated with respect by officials working in agencies. Community Welfare Officers were particularly named in this research.

- Social inclusion and customer service training should be provided for CWOs so that clients are not left feeling that they have been treated in a disrespectful manner.
- CWOs should be updated with the latest changes to entitlements so that they are able to advise lone parents appropriately, without withholding information.

The Need for Policy Change

Lone parents in low paid employment who wish to enhance their skills and qualifications should be facilitated to do this without having to return to welfare dependency. At present, a lone parent in low paid employment would have to leave his/her job and return to social welfare for a period of time in order to qualify for the Back to Education Allowance. This represents a progression delay for the individual and an additional cost to State resources.

- The Department of Social & Family Affairs should be able to exercise discretion in supporting individual lone parents to progress from low paid employment to full-time study by either waiving or reducing the 12 month requirement to be in receipt of OPFP or other welfare payment to access the Back to Education Allowance.

The Need for Parenting Supports

The research provided evidence of lone parents in Cavan who are having difficulties in the home such as managing children's behaviour. Data collectors felt strongly that preventative supports should be provided for lone parents experiencing such difficulties (e.g. those who require support with teenage children, those who require support parenting children with disability).

- Early diagnoses of children with developmental issues or disability.
- A programme of parenting supports for parents of teenage children.

Recommendations for Local Policy and Practice

Housing Issues

The research identified a need for improvements within the local authority housing system to include:

- Agreements with the Local Authority on maintenance issues and response times.
- Shortening the length of time for lone parents on the housing waiting list.

At the time of writing, OPEN has initiated meetings with Cavan County Council to examine options around developing a pilot accommodation project for lone parents in Cavan.

Costs of Progressing

In one example in this study, a lone parent who progressed to a Community Employment Scheme was put on emergency tax for the first month, which meant that her initial income from the scheme was not as high as she had anticipated. This can lead to difficulties for household budgeting and meeting other necessary expenses such as childcare.

- Local Community Employment Projects should submit tax forms in advance so that lone parents do not pay emergency tax when they start a scheme or take up employment.
- Before a lone parent commences a scheme, a letter should be sent by FÁS to the CE Project to inform them of this requirement.
- FAS should advise registered employers of the need to submit tax forms in advance for employees starting work.

Suitability of Training Options

The research identified ways of delivering education and training options that are suitable for and attractive to lone parents in Co. Cavan. Organisations involved in the delivery of education and training should ensure that:

- Courses on offer to lone parents should be non-threatening and offered in terms they will understand.
- Options should be offered on an outreach basis to lone parents living in rural areas.
- Where possible, agencies should try to incorporate costs for childcare and transport in training programmes.
- A variety of formats should be available (e.g. online software programmes to develop skills, individual sessions, small groups) as well as mainstream options.
- Incorporate 'taster' sessions to enable lone parent to sample different types of courses before deciding on an appropriate progression route.

Lack of Information

In general, lone parents want more information about opportunities available locally. Study findings showed that lone parents require information supports on a range of issues, e.g. health, welfare, employment. There is currently no specific information resource for lone parents in Co. Cavan. Local public, community and voluntary bodies should ensure that such information is available.

- Develop a booklet giving information about local services and entitlements for lone parents. (ACTION Network)
- Greater promotion of VEC services including education and training options and the Adult Education Guidance Service.
- Information for lone parents should be provided in Plain English.
- Organise inputs from statutory agencies at lone parent network meetings.

Social Supports

In addition to training and education programmes to support labour market progression, lone parents want other opportunities for networking, personal development and skill sharing. These supports can be delivered by lone parent groups and networks. Examples would include:

- Local supports around parenting (classes, groups and networking opportunities). Links should be further developed between lone parent groups and the County Childcare Committee's Family Outreach Service with regard to the delivery of parenting courses.
- Networking opportunities with other lone parents to combat isolation, share expertise and help focus on goals.

- Challenging negative stereotypes and promoting the positive aspects of parenting alone.
- Lone parents groups and networks need to be adequately resourced. The success of the Cavan Lone Parent Initiative has depended on the involvement of lone parents. Lone parents should be resourced to become involved in networks and to provide peer support for each other.
- Social events for lone parents.

Availability of Childcare and Youth Services

Members of the Action Lone Parent Network in Cavan have been finding it difficult to sustain full attendance at meetings, because members are often unable to find someone who will mind their children. The social inclusion of lone parents would be facilitated by the provision of supports for their children. For example, it would be invaluable if training courses that are being run could provide an on-site childcare service or a venue arranged nearby where children could be dropped off so that parents could take part.

- Groups and services should explore possibilities around providing childcare or children's activities to enable lone parents to attend courses/events.
- More youth services in general for teenage children to facilitate lone parents to get involved in community structures or pursue progression options.
- Programmes to support self-esteem in teenagers.

Sustained Focus on Lone Parents

It is important to continue interagency working arrangements to focus on the needs of lone parents in relation to labour market inclusion and general social inclusion.

- Continuation of the work of the Cavan Lone Parent Initiative with a SIM group agency taking the lead.
- Agencies should follow up and keep in contact with the group of lone parents who completed the modified 'Pathways' training.
- Development of a non-threatening 'tracking system' to follow up with lone parents and give continued support for their progression should they require it.

Job Placement Support

At present there is no Job Club or Local Employment Service in Co. Cavan (although Cavan Partnership provides a part-time mediation service). This is a gap in service provision for lone parents. Lone parents would benefit from a service that helps to place them in suitable jobs.

- Development of a Job Club/Local Employment Service for Cavan.
- Enhance links with employers.
- Identification of local job opportunities and work placements, particularly in part-time employment.

Other Specific Supports

A number of other specific supports and services identified as a need were:

- Counselling and career guidance supports for lone parents who require them. Where these are already available, they should be made more visible and accessible.
- Local provision of legal advice, for example, on maintenance and access issues.
- Work with schools to proactively encourage young lone parents to remain in education.
- Explore cross-border funding opportunities for linking lone parent groups north and south.
- Utilise agencies and their involvement with lone parent groups in the county to ensure that foreign nationals in the county have equal access to the available resources and information.

This research has explored some of the difficulties that lone parents experience in relation to accessing the labour market or opportunities that would help them to gain employment in County Cavan. The study was carried out from the perspective of lone parents, who, in acting as data collectors, drew on their personal experiences to choose the research questions and gather information from other lone parents throughout the county. Although the research has mainly focused on labour market barriers, it has also uncovered information on other areas of lone parents' lives, such as accommodation issues, health and care responsibilities.

The steering committee for the Cavan Lone Parents Initiative believes that these are valuable data that will help service providers and lone parents themselves to develop appropriate responses to the needs of people parenting alone in County Cavan. The project hopes that the findings will lead to positive changes for lone parents, and that the links that have been developed between organisations for this initiative can be continued into the future to support lone parents to achieve their goals.

Appendices

Appendix I Accommodation Options

Question 2 Has being a lone parent affected your accommodation options?

Unable to afford to buy a house. Renting and having to move all the time. Not feeling settled; my children not feeling settled. (Survey 1)

It has determined our location - what kind of accommodation I can afford as a lone parent and close to family and support networks. I spent many years avoiding paying rent so that I could buy a house. I managed this by sub-letting rooms in rented accommodation (illegally) and by taking a political approach to securing childcare and adequate subsidised accommodation for a period. (Survey 2)

Can't afford mortgage on my own, nowhere to go to consider other options. (Survey 3)

I feel that being a lone parent I was lucky to get Local Authority accommodation. (Survey 5)

Not in a negative way. There is more availability of LA accommodation in country areas. I rented for one and a half years but am in Local Authority accommodation now and very happy with it. (Survey 7)

I was in several flats down town before I got a Council house. I was on housing list for seven years. Lone parents should be given priority. (Survey 8)

I was living with my parents when I had my child and had to wait five years for a Council house. We were very overcrowded. (Survey 10)

Relying on Local Authority housing - getting hard to get a mortgage to be a home owner. (Survey 13)

Not in the fact of ownership but on getting mortgage cover to do repairs. (Survey 14)

Not able to get a mortgage. Feel it affected where I could rent. (Survey 15)

Couldn't get a mortgage. (Survey 16)

Financially not able to afford better. (Survey 17)

Unable to apply for a mortgage (Survey 19)

Can't buy house (Survey 20)

You could never get a mortgage to buy a house so when you go to rent a house you have to go on the Council list and if you're lucky you will get a Council list. (Survey 21)

Can't work, because of that can't buy my own house. Don't get mortgage from bank. (Survey 25)

Originally my mother's house. (Survey 27)

Banks will not entertain mortgage facilities if you are a lone parent. (Survey 28)

Harder to get a mortgage for a private house. (Survey 29)

It is a lot harder to survive and pay all the bills. (Survey 30)

Need to have accommodation suitable for children, i.e. spare room, garden, etc; can't share with others; some rented accommodation won't allow children. (Survey 32)

Hard to get a mortgage because of means. (Survey 33)

Have to take Local Authority housing. (Survey 35)

I feel I need to rent on my own as house share would rarely be suitable with a young child, and therefore more expensive. (Survey 36)

Not yet as I'm living in the family home. (Survey 45)

I'm in a two bedroom house and it's damp and I'm not entitled to a bigger house. My child needs a bigger room which she can't invite friends to stay over or even family. (Survey 51)

You have to live with others to help make payments on bills as well as help to babysit your child when you have to work. Child Care is scarce and very expensive. (Survey 55)

Affordability. (Survey 57)

Difficult to own my home. (Survey 60)

Unable to manage financially to consider buying my own home. (Survey 64)

Can't afford my own home. (Survey 65)

I am unable to consider buying my home. (Survey 66)

Renting is my only option for the foreseeable future. (Survey 6)

Would not qualify for a mortgage on my own or other bank loans. (Survey 70)

It's very hard for me to get a house of my own. (Survey 76)

Yes because if I didn't have [child] I wouldn't have a Council house. (Survey 77)

Can't afford to buy own place. (Survey 78)

Not able to afford to buy own house on one income. (Survey 79)

Can't afford to buy a house. (Survey 82)

If my children were living with me I would be living in Local Authority accommodation. (Survey 83)

Not able to afford to buy your own home because of being unemployed. Being a lone parent you feel you need your family closer to you so you remain there. (Survey 87)

Children have grown up – I need a smaller house, Council won't give it. (Survey 88)

I am currently living at home because I can't afford to rent out of home. I am further down the list. I also couldn't apply for the Council 'cause I didn't have PPS number for him or child benefit number. (Survey 90)

I can't afford other than renting accommodation. (Survey 91)

While renting people were reluctant to share with a child which meant I had to pay full rent on accommodation and some landlords were reluctant to rent to children. (Survey 95)

It's too expensive to live on your own. (Survey 96)

Downsized from home in Dublin. (Survey 102)

Appendix II Reasons for Not Finishing Education

Question 5 Did you feel you were prevented from finishing education?

If yes, why:

I put myself through Uni. in Northern Ireland (students from the Republic were not required to pay fees at the time), and I did this while caring for my son...I also wanted to continue on and complete a master's degree, but I was unable to sustain myself in full-time education both practically and financially and could not get the additional support to enable me to do so at the time. This has had long-term consequences for my career path, which I'm sure would have been very different had I had some choices back then. (Survey 2)

Parents took me out of school because I was being bullied. (Survey 4)

Being a member of a large family I did not get the opportunity to finish my education. (Survey 5)

I did not complete course due to my father's illness. (Survey 6)

I would have liked to go to university but financial issues and lack of a car prevented me. I found distance education isolating. (Survey 7)

Had to go out and work and look after sick parents – needed money. (Survey 9)

Bullied at school by teachers because I had epilepsy so my parents removed me from school. (Survey 10)
Work at home. (Survey 11)

Home life very hard and had no support. (Survey 16)

Have commitments to the children first. (Survey 18)

Pregnancy. (Survey 19)

Pressure to work. (Survey 29)

My child, not having enough money. (Survey 39)

Put out to work at aged 13 years by parents. (Survey 44)

Taking care of my child. (Survey 55)

Personal / Background (Survey 56)

Recession. I am one of nine children. (Survey 59)

Having my son at a very early age. (Survey 66)

Left, moved to England with ex-husband (Survey 67)

Just until I had my daughter well reared, as paying for childcare etc. was very expensive. (Survey 73)

Taken out of school. (Survey 83)

I have a learning difficulty. (Survey 85)

The course was too difficult for me and I chose to pursue another course and was told that I could not receive anymore financial support from the VEC so could not do what I wished. (Survey 86)

Due to bullying. (Survey 87)

Taken out of school and put to work by my parents. (Survey 86)

Circumstances did not allow me to continue with my education. Could not afford to keep up education. (Survey 91)

I finished my education but I found it difficult due to my financial situation. (Survey 95)

Having a child. (Survey 100)

Appendix III Additional Comments on Barriers to Progression

Question 11 (Part 1) Do you have any issues or barriers that you feel are relevant to you as a lone parent, which you feel stops you from progressing?

Literacy Issues

Getting help now.
Difficulty in communicating.

Childcare

Too expensive.
Social networks essential in addition to formal childcare.
In the past. Daughter is 13 now.
Feel isolated, I can't get out.
Can only work mornings.
While attending college.

Lack of Finance

Finance and childcare are interlinked.
Generally okay but this was an issue in the past.
Money isn't enough – fallen into debt.
For training, course expensive.
Welfare payment not enough.
At times, what with working part-time.
Stopped me applying for course as I had to pay.

Other Care Responsibilities

Voluntary carer for mother in law.
Son (has) ADHD.
Child with disability.

Lack of Confidence

Social attitudes towards lone parents are still very negative.
Maybe in the past. It can affect self-esteem.

Lack of Information

Lack of meaningful and relevant info.
At first, when I returned home.
Only for friends telling me I would be lost.
Not enough information on courses etc.
More relevant information.
Sometimes had to access on phone, i.e. social welfare.

Lack of Support

Need for support networks, in-kind support/targeted supplementary financial assistance esp. if family not available.
There was a lack of support to begin with but loads of support now.
Isolation.
No support.
Non payment from children's father.

Health Issues or Disability

Health inevitably suffers.
Some depression in the past.
Health bad – have severe chronic asthma. Cannot walk, have to get taxis for shopping. Also suffer from depression.
I can only do certain jobs due to my problems.
Memory problem.
Diabetic.
Nerves, anxiety and depression.
Sometimes – operation recently and depression.
Asthma, MRSA.

Problems in the home

A range of problems can stem out of lack of support – not always specific to the parent or parent-child relationship.
In the past.

Family Issues

Family issues can emerge because of negative social attitudes – socialisation can be problematic.
Totally on my own.

Appendix IV Problems with Transport

Question 11 (Part 2) Do you have a problem with transport?

I always have to rely on public transport or my friends. (Survey 5)

The biggest issues are transport, not being able to drive, high insurance costs for learners. (Survey 7)

I have health problems. If I want to go shopping, I have to pay for taxis which is proving costly, or else rely on friends. (Survey 8)

I have to make trips to Sligo and Beaumont Hospital regularly and have to rely on public transport. This can prove costly. (Survey 9)

I have a lot of hospital appointments and have to rely on my father or pay for taxis, which is costly. (Survey 10)

No regular bus travel. (Survey 16)

Not able to commute. (Survey 17)

No regular bus available and taxis too expensive. (Survey 20)

Have to rely on other people for transport. (Survey 23)

Getting to and fro, have to rely on buses. (Survey 26)

No transport to access training. (Survey 27)

Too expensive to travel on Bus Eireann. (Survey 42)

Because it limits my access to areas I need to travel to (hospital etc.) (Survey 44)

Not enough money to get around in taxis. (Survey 76)

Don't drive, have to pay taxi to get to work (Survey 80)

Don't drive. (Survey 89)

I do have my own car but I find it quite costly to run. (Survey 86)

With no training is it very hard to support your child in under paid jobs. With the correct training we could move on to better paid jobs and careers. (Survey 87)

Very bad travel system. (Survey 93)

Very poor transport system. (Survey 94)

In past found it very hard to travel and often had to pay for taxis, which I found hard and when I started working I bought a car immediately even though it was a financial struggle. (Survey 95)

My mother's car, when available. Very costly insurance. (Survey 99)

Appendix V Services for Lone Parents in County Cavan

The following is a list of services provided to lone parents in County Cavan by agencies involved in the steering committee of the Cavan Lone Parent Initiative.

Cavan VEC Adult Education Services

Cavan VEC Adult Education Services recognises the importance of ongoing learning throughout our lives and provides a comprehensive range of education services for adults which include full-time, part-time, day and evening courses in VEC schools and centres around the county. We also provide additional support services for the adult learner to assist them with their ongoing learning experience.

Co. Cavan VEC Adult Education Services makes every effort to reach out to lone parents in Co. Cavan. The following services are available and free to lone parents.

Co. Cavan VEC Adult Learning Centre

The Adult Learning Centre offers second chance education to adults throughout the county. Learners can brush up on their basic skills, reading, writing and numeracy - to find a job, do an apprenticeship, or assist their children with their homework.

Programmes offered range from one-to-one tuition for adults with literacy difficulties through the Adult Basic Education Scheme, to FETAC accredited modules delivered in small group classes. Students decide what they wish to learn; whether to be able to help children with homework, improve handwriting, reading books and newspapers, understanding and filling in forms as some examples. The Adult Learning Centre also offers Workplace Education programmes, Family Learning Programmes as well as ESOL programmes.

Community Education Service

The Community Education Service provides adult education for Community Groups in their local areas. Group organisers can contact the service for assistance in setting up training for their group members in areas such as Computers, ECDL, Drama, Childcare, First Aid, Accounts, Cookery, to name but a few. The Service can assist people interested in setting up a group in their area, help them to source funding, network with other groups, advise on quality and certification etc. The Community Education Service will be available to the new ACTION lone parent network in Co. Cavan.

Adult Educational Guidance

The Adult Education Guidance Information Service (AEGIS) provides support and information to adults who are considering making a return to education but are not sure what path to take or what area to study. The guidance service offers one-to-one guidance sessions with adults to identify their goals and interests and this is followed up with information on where they can pursue these goals in terms of courses of education. The service can also assist people from other countries in getting their qualifications recognised and put them in touch with other support services. Assistance is also given on CV preparation and interview techniques. Information is available on all full and part-time courses nationwide.

Youthreach

Youthreach is a two year training course for young people between the ages of 15 and 18 years, which helps to bridge the gap between school and employment and paves the way for the young to become employed adults. Benefits to participants include work experience and training, and the opportunity for qualifications. Co. Cavan VEC delivers three Youthreach programmes in Kingscourt, Cavan town and Cootehill.

Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)

The VTOS scheme is a European Social Fund supported intervention in the Irish Labour market to enable unemployed people who have been on the Live Register for at least six months to access education and training with a view to progression to employment. The minimum age for participation in VTOS is 21 years. It is a two year programme and applies to all courses offered at Cavan Institute.

Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)

The Back to Education Initiative was launched by the Department of Education and Science in 2002 and is part funded by the European Social Fund. It provides an opportunity for young people and adults to return to learning. The courses provided under this initiative are flexible and allow people to combine their learning with family, work and other responsibilities. Courses offered through BTEI include:

- FETAC Level 3 programmes. Modules can include Communications, Numeracy and Computer Literacy. Completion of eight module leads to a full FETAC Certificate which is equivalent to Junior Certificate.
- FETAC Level 4 Programmes. Modules can include Communications, Computer Applications and Information Technology Skills.
- FETAC Level 5 Programmes. Childcare, Floristry and Hotel & Catering.
- FETAC Level 6 Programmes. Childcare Supervisor
- ECDL

Department of Social & Family Affairs

The Department Social & Family Affairs provides a range of supports and incentives to progress the development of all of its customers to participate in society without dependence on welfare payments.

Back to Work Scheme for those wishing to take up employment as an employee. This scheme allows eligible participants to retain their Social Welfare payment at a reduced rate, tax free, over 3 years.

Back to Work Enterprise Allowance for persons wishing to set up their own business. This scheme allows eligible participants to retain 100% of their Social Welfare payment for 1 year and then at a reduced rate, tax free, for the following 3 years.

Back to Education for those who wish to further their level of education either on a full time or part time basis.

Family Income Supplement which is available to those, with responsibility for children, in low paid employment who may qualify for a weekly top up.

All of these schemes are designed to encourage and assist those marginalised in society and in danger of becoming long term welfare dependents to take positive steps to improve their quality of living for themselves and their families.

Furthermore the Facilitator with the Social & Family Support Service offers guidance and advice to the department's customers about other options that may be available from agencies and services locally. To hear about these schemes in more detail contact:

Anne Malone at (047) 30160

Facilitator Role in activating and supporting Lone Parents in Co Cavan

The Department Social & Family Affairs provides a range of supports and incentives to progress the development of all of its customers to participate in society without dependence on welfare payments. It is recognised that our customers need to be familiar with all these incentives to assist them in making positive changes to their lives and their families' lives. To this end the department, through it's Social & Family Support Service provides a Facilitator allocated to Co Cavan & North Monaghan whose function it is to inform the department's customers on the supports incentives available. The Facilitator does this through direct contact on a one to one basis as well as attending and briefing Jobs Clubs, FAS Training Courses, CE scheme, other initiatives delivered in the community as well as promoting the Department's incentives on Steering Groups and Projects. Also through mailshot to encourage participation, of a particular target group, in forthcoming events, training etc.

The Department of Social & Family Affairs supports the Citizens Information Service which provides information on a wide range of issues, organisations, statutory bodies etc. and this service is available to the public in general. In Cavan an outreach mobile service has been introduced recently.

At a National Level, the Department provides an Information Lo Call number which is available to all citizens to seek clarity on the full range of Social Welfare, Services Rights and Entitlements.

1890 66 22 44 (Lo Call)

**(from within the Republic of Ireland)
9.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Monday To Friday**

Women into the Network (WIN Ireland)

Linking women to business opportunities and supports

Women into the Network (WIN) is a networking programme which was set up in 2004 to facilitate the development of women's businesses throughout the country, by supporting and linking women to business opportunities. The twin aims of WIN are to integrate women into existing and new business networks and to bridge the gap between the extensive provision of business and professional support available. WIN is currently funded by Accel, an initiative under the Skillnets programme funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. WIN provides supports to women at all areas of business development. The WIN Network endeavours to:

Inspire women into enterprise - By stimulating women to consider self-employment

Accelerate women into enterprise - To accelerate the process for those who demonstrate some interest in setting up their own business

Enhance women in enterprise - For those women already in business, with a clear desire and need for growth

The WIN model provides an informal but structured organisational plan where the responsibility for organising and conducting the meetings is shared equally between all members. Learning by doing creates a "Can-do" sense of ownership where all the members feel they are valuable to the success of the system and that each and every one of them has something to gain from participating fully in the group.

Since 2004, WIN has established four business women's networks in Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim and Roscommon. The network is managed by Helena Collins and a steering committee, and is driven by its members who actively support and promote each other's businesses and where many businesses have developed and grown. WIN holds a wide variety of events, including networking events, sector promotional events, cross border and international events, training for both business development and to those who are in the rural areas wondering what next. A number of these women are now in the process of exploring business ideas and some have started their own businesses. The network has established active links with other networks, particularly in the North, where they have been jointly holding events to break the barriers and encourage members to support each other's businesses across the border.

Some of the interventions which are made available for members include: network meetings, training, mentoring, promotion and communications and one to one support.

Cavan Partnership

Cavan Partnership Company Ltd aims to provide an effective and co-ordinated response to combat social exclusion and disadvantage in Co Cavan through the provision of community development initiatives, and the provision of education, training, employment and enterprise opportunities.

Cavan Partnership engages in a positive response to the needs of various groups identified through the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme and develops structures which facilitate the meaningful participation and involvement of those groups in the social and economic development of their area.

Community Development actions in Cavan Partnership are many and varied and include urban and rural development initiatives – the need for targeting is paramount with priority target areas identified.

Target groups /sector include all of the following:

Disadvantaged young people

Travellers

The Long Term unemployed

Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants

Substance Mis-users

Disadvantaged Communities

People with Disabilities

Disadvantaged Women

People with Low Incomes

Low Income Smallholders

Ex-prisoners

Lone Parents

Older People

Homeless People

Since the Cavan Lone Parent Initiative was established, Cavan Partnership has provided funding and specific community development supports to the Action Lone Parent Network.

Cavan Local Authorities

Like other local authorities, Cavan Local Authorities provide housing to people who are unable to afford their own home. Housing units are allocated to individuals and families, including lone parent families, who are on the Housing List on the basis of need and the type of housing available.

Cavan has further enhanced the social inclusion element of this work by employing two Housing Liaison Officers to work with local authority housing residents. They support the tenants to set up tenants' associations, access funding, maintain green areas and get involved in general estate management. The Housing Liaison Officers organise tenancy training programmes to support tenants.

The Rental Accommodation Scheme [RAS] has commenced in County Cavan. Through this new scheme, the local authority will take over rent subsidies formerly paid by Community Welfare Officers. The RAS Officer meets with people in receipt of rent supplement, assesses the quality of their accommodation, and if it is sufficiently good, seeks to make an arrangement with the landlord for lease of the premises. In County Cavan, there are over 500 people on rent supplement. Over 200 of these are in receipt of rent supplement for 18 months or longer. These are people who are on the margins because they are not able to provide accommodation for themselves. They include lone fathers whose children are not living with them, ethnic minorities, lone parents and others. The intervention of the County Council and the development of a relationship with the landlord should help to improve the quality of accommodation on offer and give tenants greater security of tenure. The programme hopes to develop contractual relationships with landlords so that a pool of good quality accommodation is available to low income tenants on a long-term basis.

The Cavan County Manager has recently undertaken to explore the development of a pilot accommodation project for lone parents in the county, working with OPEN to address identified issues within the local authority accommodation system.

Cavan County Development Board has been one of the lead agencies on the 'Cavan Lone Parent Initiative' during 2006 and 2007. This interagency initiative delivered a range of education and training supports to lone parents in the county.

Cavan County Council has been involved in the provision of playgrounds throughout the county. Playgrounds are socially inclusive in that they are free of charge to all families. At present there are 14 playgrounds completed, and a further eight planned for completion by March 2008. They are situated on public transport routes or within walking distance of residential areas. Some playgrounds are situated beside local authority estates. This infrastructure has been enhanced by the availability of Peace funding in the Border area.

The Cavan RAPID Programme is a government initiative that aims to increase investment in disadvantaged areas, improve service delivery and enhance community participation. It prioritised projects that enhance the quality of life for residents in the Cavan Town RAPID area, with a particular focus on the local authority estates. The Cavan RAPID Programme has made significant progress in relation to physical infrastructure and services.

These have included traffic calming, playgrounds and other infrastructure in the town area which benefit the community as a whole. RAPID services play a positive role in alleviating the effects of social exclusion experienced by lone parents and their children. These services include:

- The Cavan RAPID Youth Project which provides a dedicated youth service for young people aged 6-18 years living in local authority estates in the town.
- The Cavan Family Outreach Project provides family support services to families in the RAPID Communities.

In 2007, a lone parent representative was co-opted onto the Cavan Community & Voluntary Forum. This forum provides a mechanism for community-based organisations to feed into policy and to become involved in collaborative work on issues affecting their communities.

Cavan County Council also plays an important role in social inclusion through the administration of higher education grants and community grants. One of the groups to receive a community grant in 2007 was the Action Lone Parent.

Cavan Public Libraries are a free service for the entire community. Lone parents can borrow children's and adults books, use the public internet access points, avail of DVD loans and other services such as language courses and Driver Theory test disks.

South West Cavan Community Development Project

South West Cavan C.D.P. is a rural community development project that aims to tackle issues of disadvantage, isolation, prejudice and inequality thus increasing the quality of life of the local community. The project is managed by local people for local people and serves the areas of Crosserlough, Ballymachugh, Mullahoran, Denn, and parts of Lower Lavey and Ballintemple. We are currently setting up a One Parent Family Support Group which has a social focus. We also run training courses tailored specifically to the needs and interests of lone parents and some of our past courses have included 'Self Esteem and Confidence for Your Child' and 'Active Citizenship/ Voter Education Training'. The project also provides advice, information and referrals to lone parents on the issues of social welfare entitlements, education and training, childcare, and domestic violence.

Community Welfare - Health Service Executive

The Community Welfare Service's role is to prevent and alleviate poverty by providing information, advice, referral and assessment services and financial support where appropriate. We aim to achieve this in a flexible, caring, responsive and equitable manner in order to improve and enhance the lives of all our customers. Our financial supports include the following:

Supplementary Welfare Basic Payments

Supplements: Rents, Mortgages, Diets, etc.

Exceptional Needs Payments: Back to School Clothing and Footwear Scheme.

Cavan County Childcare Committee

Cavan County Childcare Committee [CCC] Ltd was established in 2001 along with 32 others nationwide to act as the key local component in the development of a co-ordinated approach to quality childcare at local level. We act in an advisory and co-ordinating capacity providing advice, information, training, support and assistance to all childcare providers on a wide variety of childcare related topics. We also support community based groups and private individuals to apply for funding under the National Childcare Investment Programme 2007-2010.

Cavan CCC also supports parents. This type of support includes the publication of a directory of services in the county, guidance on quality childcare, information on a wide range of childcare related issues through website, newsletter and newspaper articles. The Family Outreach Service is a joint service between Cavan County Childcare Committee and the Health Service Executive [HSE] for parents of children aged under 12 in County Cavan. This service was set up to work with all parents including lone parents in the county. The type of supports it provides include individual home based parenting courses and support where families have been referred. They also work within the community to provide training courses for groups of parents such as 'Swings and Slides' and 'Cook It'. We also support lone parents through supporting the community based childcare services by encouraging them and helping them adapt a tiered fee payment structure to provide for reduced rates for parents in need.

Cavan CCC is managed and directed through a committee which encompasses a broad spectrum of stakeholders in County Cavan such as County Development Board, County Enterprise Board, Childminding Ireland, Department of Social & Family Affairs, Cavan Partnership, FAS, HSE, Vocational Education Committee, Community & Voluntary Forum, community and private providers, Department of Education & Science, and trade unions representatives.

Ma's and Pa's Lone Parents Group, Tullacmongan Resource Centre

The Ma's and Pa's Lone Parent group was set up in the year 2000 by Teach Oscail Family Resource Centre, mainly as a social outlet and somewhere for lone parents to meet and discuss ideas and their various issues. Ma's and Pa's stands for Meeting Aims Socially and Parenting Alone Supportively. The group's aim is to provide a space that is fun, relaxing and a supportive environment for all lone parents; to provide an accessible education and training programme to meet all the needs and interests of lone parents.

The group has 20 members. Up to recently there were three men involved with the group. Two of these attained employment and, because of their working hours, had to leave the group and we now just have one man in the group.

Through Cavan Partnership members received training, set up their own committee and availed of various training programmes through funding received from Cavan VEC, Department of Social and Family Affairs, Family Support Agency, Cavan Partnership and Cavan County Council. Some of the training availed of included: Computers, Assertiveness, Reflexology, DIY, Arts/Crafts, Domestic Violence, Legal Entitlements, and many other such courses. Members will be participating in a Personal Development course in October. Two of the members completed a Leadership Course run by OPEN in conjunction with the National College of Ireland [NCI], and eight of the group have received a certificate for completion of Year One from the NCI 'Parents in Education' programme. They will be graduating for completion of Year Two in October 2007 and currently five of them have commenced Year Three year and will receive a diploma at the end of the third year.

Three years ago some group members carried out a survey of lone parent needs in the Cavan area. Results from this were collated with information gathered from lone parents throughout the north east region. With the assistance of NEXUS, a database was set up and results were presented in the presence of Minister Rory O'Hanlon.

Ma's and Pa's is a member group of OPEN (One Parent Exchange and Network) the national network of local lone parent self-help groups.

FÁS

FÁS provides a range of supports to enable people acquire new skills, develop existing skills or find a job. These supports include:

- Registration and guidance service
- Assistance with career path planning
- Retraining or up-skilling
- Vacancy matching service

FÁS runs a number of training courses each year in Co. Cavan and IT training is also available through our Multi Media Training facility. FAS e-College provides on-line training 24 hours per day, 7 days per week and there are in excess of 50 training options available. There is a training allowance payable to people while they are participating on a day time course. There is also a childcare allowance payable to participants to assist with necessary childcare costs.

Community Employment offers eligible people the opportunity to develop new skills and gain valuable work experience in preparation for a return to work. There are a number of Community Employment programmes running throughout the county in conjunction with local community groups. The work involved varies from childcare, office work, general maintenance, care of the elderly and disabled people.

There is a range of supports available for people with disabilities to assist them in returning to work. These include specialist training provision in conjunction with the National Learning Network and a variety of grants including the Wage Subsidy Scheme which pays a subsidy to employers to encourage them to recruit people with disabilities.

FÁS Jobs Ireland is a database of vacancies available to jobseekers and employers. All local vacancies notified to FAS are on display in the local office in Cavan. The information is also accessible via the free-phone number at 1800 611116 or via the website at www.fas.ie. The website includes a number of invaluable aids such as an A-Z of Careers; Creating a CV Online; and Interview Tips, along with information on Work Permits; and Employment Rights.

For further information on any of the above services, please contact your local FÁS Employment Services Office at Thomas Ashe Street, Cavan, Telephone: 049 437 9600 or FÁS Jobs Ireland at 1800 611116 or www.fas.ie