Towards a Better Future: Research on Labour Market needs and Social Exclusion of One Parent Families in Galway City and County

Conducted by

Child and Family Research Centre

NUI Galway

Project Team

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On Behalf of

The One Parent Family Research Steering Group

Foreword

In early 2006 and in conjunction with Galway City Development Board Galway City Partnership commissioned the Child and Family Research Centre at NUI-Galway to undertake a major piece of research into those parenting alone in Galway City and County.

While this report reflects the growing national interest in one-parent family welfare recipients, those parenting alone have been recognised by Galway City Partnership as one group at risk of social exclusion and in need of support and specific interventions. Lack of local information regarding those parenting alone and more specifically one-parent family welfare recipients have been identified as a serious gap in developing meaningful programme responses to enable employment progression options for this group.

We established an Interagency Steering Group not only to direct the research but also to identify ways in which local agencies could respond more imaginatively to the social inclusion and labour market needs of one-parent families via the research process and as an indication of how collaboration could develop by taking the recommendations into an implementation phase.

Galway City Partnership's social inclusion approach involved encouraging and enabling parents without power to clearly express their views on how to improve their standard of living, acknowledging their right to have adequate time to be a parent and examining how to develop a model that recognises the multi dimensional needs of lone-parents when trying to make informed choices regarding their social and economic needs.

Working with key agencies and groups we intend to take key recommendations from the research findings and test them out locally by piloting a number of different programmes. By tracking the outcomes from these pilots over a period of a year we hope to demonstrate that through a framework of engagement, a social inclusion model is best suited to facilitate the social inclusion of one-parent families and their participation in the labour market.

For such a model to have a real chance of success we need to change the connections between those who make and deliver policy and those expected to be subject to it. We also need to find new ways for the expressed needs of lone parents' families to be heard rather than being sidelined. The debate should include discussions about how best to provide value for money, rather than an exercise in cost containment.

I believe that the research and its recommendations, will not only provide a sound platform to pave the way for the sustained social inclusion of those who parent alone in Galway City and County but for lone parents nationwide.

Elaine Harvey
Chairperson
One Parent Family Research Interagency Steering Group

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Executive Summary of

Towards a Better Future: Research into the Labour Market needs and Social Exclusion of One Parent Families in Galway City and County

1. Introduction

In light of the fact that there is little reliable and up to date information on one-parent families in Galway City and County, the need to establish baseline data on the reality of life for those parenting alone was identified as important by a group of local service providers. This group became known as ROPE1. It commissioned a research project designed to gather basic information about the past and current level of engagement of those parenting alone in the labour market and their experiences of this process. Particularly, the research was interested in the barriers to engagement with education, training or taking up employment and the barriers for those who do to remain there. Likewise the research sought to identify those facilitative factors that enabled/ would enable those who parent alone to engage with the labour market and education in a way that would improve life for them and their children.

The study consisted of a theoretical part and an empirical part. The theoretical part of the One Parent Family Study included an extensive literature review compiled by Dr. Mary Murphy, NUI, Maynooth. The empirical part of the study targeted policy makers, service providers and service users. Data collection was based on a multi-method strategy consisting of a) a questionnaire survey for One Parent Family Payment recipients in Galway City and County, b) semi-structured interviews with those parenting alone in selected locations and c) a set of qualitative interviews with policy actors involved in the design and delivery of services for one parent families.

This research takes place in the context of major policy changes in relation to one parent families, particularly in terms of existing barriers to entering the labour market and / or education and training. The most concrete expression in Ireland of the changes ahead has come in the Government Discussion Paper: Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents. These proposals suggest that policy changes are likely to involve major reform in welfare support for those parenting alone (DSFA, 2006). Critically, these proposals will incorporate conditionality in payment, with those parenting alone in receipt of the payment expected to begin connecting to the labour market as their children approach the upper age limit for payment of the Parental Allowance.

2. Key Findings of the One Parent Family Questionnaire (OPFQ)

The OPFQ targeted men and women in Galway City and County who were in receipt of the OPFP at the time of the study (February 2007). Overall 3,144 parents who parent alone were written to and 676 (22%) participants completed and returned the OPFQ. A wide range of quality of life indicators are explored and the survey focuses on a range of perceived opportunities and barriers to further education and employment, as reported by the survey respondents. The results of the OPFQ reflect the complexity of one parent family life in Galway City and County and shows that OPFP recipients do not constitute a homogenous group but differ significantly in their needs, experiences and coping strategies. In particular their social and economic circumstances tend to vary and this affects both the quality of life of those parenting alone and their experiences looking for and taking up further education, training, or paid work.

Many respondents are concerned about the financial implications and possible economic insecurity they associate with the transition from OPFP and related payments to paid employment, education or training. On the other hand, the OPFQ has shown the significance of social support networks that many (not all) parents can draw on, in particular with regard to parenting support given by grandparents and other members of the family. Access and mobility also play a crucial role in relation to employment, education and training opportunities. It is here that rural-urban differences are most pronounced. Many jobs, services and educational programmes continue to be based in Galway City and the larger towns in County Galway making it difficult to

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1   Refer to Appendix for a list of the Steering Group.

access these services and facilities. In a small number of cases, working from home or in the local area provided a much needed opportunity to have a small income and/or to experience social contacts outside the family. This said support from members of the family regarding childcare often remains a very important factor even in cases where part-time options are available.

The key findings of the OPFQ are:

- One parent families in Galway City and County form a demographically diverse group

- Mothers with children make up the largest number of one parent families

- The heads of one parent families cross all age groups

- 20% of OPFQ respondents classified themselves as non-Irish nationals

- Older parents are more likely to report health problems and respondents' perception of health (but not their reported health status) affects their quality of life

- Location – urban versus rural – significantly influences access to employment, education/training and OPF services of those parenting alone

- Housing insecurity, cost of renting and dependence on the private rental sector are key issues for many who parent alone

- Family in general, and parents in particular, provide vital support in parenting, thereby enabling those parenting alone to return to work/education/training

- The primary barriers to employment/education/training identified by participants include financial concerns; housing constraints; childcare issues; limited availability of suitable jobs/courses; accessibility issues; and difficulties balancing work and family life.

3. The lives and experiences of One Parent Families in Galway City and County

Of the 676 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 235 self-selected for interview. From this data base a sample of 60 were selected for interview with parents coming from a range of backgrounds and experiences spread over Galway City and County. This sample featured parents who are working, parents who are in education, parents in training programmes, parents who work in the home, parents who are newcomers to Ireland and members of the Traveller community. The picture painted by those parenting alone in Galway City and County of their lives and experiences in a one parent family in receipt of the OPFP is a stark one, fraught with difficulties and challenges. Yet it is also one of resilience, of strength, of managing to sustain healthy family life under the pressures of parenting alone and in particular the financial stresses that this brings. The participants in this study could easily identify the barriers they faced in being 'socially included' but they could also identify the solutions to these barriers.

Key Findings

- Poverty is a very real part of the lives of those parenting alone in Galway City and County and managing daily life on a low income was one of the most striking features of the interviews.

- Debt was a common experience among the participants and financial security was a stated desire of many of the participants.

- Social exclusion in the form of being unable to engage in activities outside the home in any form is evident.

- Housing insecurity was highlighted by many participants as being a major stress in their lives. Many problems were encountered with the Rent Supplement Scheme in private rented accommodation.

- Stigma is still acutely felt by many people parenting alone. The focus of the stigma has changed however from grounds of sexual morality to parents experiencing society as perceiving them as 'sponging off the state' and not valuing their role as a parent.

- Poverty, housing insecurity and stigma have a very real impact on the parents' well-being including their physical and mental health.

- Support networks were cited as very important with the parents own family providing support in most cases.

- Many of the parents interviewed stated that more information is needed regarding rights, entitlements, negotiating the social welfare system, future options in training, education or employment.

- It was also felt by many interviewees that their role as a parent - a sole parent - was not adequately valued and more value should be put on their parenting role.

4. Barriers in returning to and remaining in education/training and employment

Participants highlighted certain issues that made it difficult for them to return to, or remain in employment, education or training. Issues regarding their children, such as the effect that working or being in education or training has on their children, the age of their child, feeling guilty leaving their child and the type of childcare used, were all identified by parents as important. The level of family support, time management skills and their self confidence levels were also acknowledged by the participants as being a barrier to returning and remaining in education, training or employment. On a practical level, participants highlighted financial and physical obstacles, some of which are specific to either education and training, or employment, as barriers also.

The accounts of the barriers faced by those parenting alone in accessing training, education and employment reflect a complex set of scenarios facing parents. Chief among the priorities of parents is the well-being of their children, and the impact entering training or education or taking up employment, would have on them. Yet many spoke of the desire to enter employment, to progress in training and education so as to provide for their families and meet their needs. Notwithstanding feelings of guilt, these parents detail how they strive to maintain a home, rear children and, in some cases, work or pursue full-time education. Yet numerous barriers exist which serve to complicate their multi-faceted lives and constrain their desires. Any initiatives developed to socially include those parenting alone will need to acknowledge and address such circumstances.

Key Findings

- The key concern for many of these parents is the well-being, both physical and psychological, of their children. Being a parent is a key role for these participants;

- For those in education/training or working, significant barriers exist which make it difficult to maintain their current situation;

- Many parents suffer a sense of guilt about leaving their children to work or attend training and education courses. The inability of some to avail of networks of close family and friends to mind children can exacerbate this sense of guilt. For those who do have such networks, the benefit is enormous;

- Parents removed from the labour market or out of education/training for a long period of time are intimidated by their perceived lack of knowledge and skills, and the environment they might be about to enter;

- The impact of a loss – or even potential loss – of benefits if education or training courses are taken up plays very much on the mind of those parenting alone. The financial reality of such families often militates against availing of opportunities to enter education;

- For those seeking to enter employment, the absence of well-paid, flexible opportunities precludes their entrance into the labour market. The potential to be worse off, combined with an inability to take time off at short notice, is an important consideration for these parents;

- An absence of services, along with other structural barriers, such as transport, serves to further complicate the lives of those living in rural areas. The extra time spent travelling to and from urban hubs where services are provided adds to the levels of stress experienced by parents and can distress children;

- Childcare and in particular affordable, accessible, flexible childcare is deemed by many parents to be a key barrier to entering employment, or taking up training and education opportunities;

- For those parents in education and training, the existence of a number of family supports makes it possible to do so;

- The benefits of working or entering training/education are highlighted by parents as being manifold: broadening of social networks; greater financial security; greater sense of self-worth; greater sense of confidence; and a more positive outlook which can impact positively on parents and children.

5. Experiences with agencies

Parents were asked about their views of the organisations they engage with, and the services they use which are provided by such organisations. Parents found dealing with organisations quite difficult, primarily because they believe that some organisations are not forthcoming with information about entitlements and services. It appears that the onus is on the individual to find out about what is available to them. The rules and regulations surrounding services and entitlements are regarded as far from straight forward. Some participants spoke of having a positive experience when dealing with service providers in the statutory arena. However, the majority recounted difficulties in dealing with them. These difficulties come under three main categories: experiences with personnel of the service provider: experiences of visiting the service provider offices: and a lack of efficiency and consistency in the application of rules and regulations governing benefits and allowances by service providers. Quite often one bad experience with one representative of an organisation can leave a lasting impact on the respondents and can often make them reluctant to return to that organisation for information.

Key Findings

- Despite the numerous organisations providing services which can be accessed by those parenting alone, the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA), the Community Welfare Officers (CWOs), FÁS, and the City and County Councils are the organisations which they interact with most frequently;

- Many parents spoke about having positive experiences with the CWOs, ranging from supplementary supports and benefits to financial advice;

- However, many parents also spoke of negative experiences with CWOs. Such experiences were characterised by poor personal relations, a lack of sensitivity about the needs of individual parents, and an unwillingness on behalf of some CWOs to be forthcoming about benefits and available supports;

- Many of the parents who engaged with FÁS spoke positively about their experiences, particularly those on the Community Employment (CE) scheme. The dedicated one-to-one approach of staff in the organisation, and the differentiated level of

courses, served to enhance their experience, enabled them to progress at their own pace and provided a social outlet for them;

- However, some parents were frustrated at the organisation's lack of awareness regarding their personal circumstances, particularly in relation to their availability to take up employment if offered;

- Although the DSFA was cited as a supportive and informative organisation in some regards, the majority of parents were dissatisfied with their initial experience of staff when applying for the One Parent Family Payment. Parents spoke of feeling intimidated in their encounters with DSFA staff and they experienced what they perceived as unacceptable delays in the processing of claims. A lack of information when applying for claims was also cited as problematic when engaging with the organisation, as was the inability of the organisation to allocate staff to specific parents;

- The regulations governing benefits financed by the DSFA were identified as complex and confusing. In particular, the threshold levels linked to benefits, and the impact of periodic work upon benefits, served to confuse many and ultimately discourage them from taking up training, education or employment opportunities. The threshold levels of the rental supplement scheme were deemed to be inappropriate to local market conditions;

- The City and County Councils, as housing authorities, play a significant role in the lives of many of the participants. While both councils were cited as engaging positively with them, there were a number of instances where experiences were negative. Such experiences centred specifically on an unwillingness on behalf of some staff to provide accurate information to parents, and more generally on a lack of professionalism in dealing with parents;

- The participants interacted with a variety of other organisations in the state and voluntary sector, including third-level education providers, family resource centres, local education projects, community development projects, rural development companies, housing organisations and the St. Vincent de Paul. The experiences of the parents who engaged with these organisations were positive. Such organisations provided a range of supports, from information and social support to financial assistance and business grants;

- Parents identified a number of difficulties common to all organisations providing services which they can avail of, either statutory or voluntary. Chief amongst these was an acute lack of awareness about some of the organisations they were asked about – many simply had never heard of the organisation mentioned to them while others were unsure or unaware about what they did. Others, particularly in rural areas, identified an acute lack of service provision generally as being a significant factor in their daily lives. Others again identified the potential value of organisations working together to provide a cross-referral service for parents.

6. The Views of National Policy Actors and Local Service Providers on Social Exclusion and the Labour Market Needs of those Parenting Alone

Interviews with policy makers and service providers aimed to generate insights on how to respond more imaginatively to labour market and social inclusion needs of those parenting alone. Additionally, the interviews aimed to access knowledge of both national and local actors of the influences, design and proposed implementation of the government proposals. In all, 23 interviews were conducted involving 29 actors covering a range of national and local statutory and voluntary agencies involved in formulating policies or who provide services for those parenting alone. The interviews highlight a number of issues pertinent to the current government proposals for those parenting alone. At the national level actors revealed that the DSFA (2006) proposals emanated primarily out of concern with poverty levels experienced by those parenting alone and their families. However, some non-statutory actors identified the economic drive behind the proposals as being the primary thrust and expressed concern that the proposals may result in placing those parenting alone into jobs at any cost rather than focussing on the needs of the parents. While officials viewed the proposals as being broadly positive for both parent and children, non-statutory actors were

more cautious regarding the impact, highlighting the need to have services in place before the proposals. Key amongst these is the notion of making the scheme voluntary.

At the local level responses suggested the potential for the DSFA (2006) proposals, if implemented, to come unstuck through service provision difficulties. Such difficulties ranged from rules and procedures adding to the stress experienced by those parenting alone to the experiences of service users by individuals within these organisations. Most notable perhaps, is the lack specific services for those who parent alone. Difficulties in accessing services in rural areas were also a significant concern for those living in the County. While the national actors revealed that collaborative processes would be crucial to the successful implementation of the proposals, local accounts of such processes to date indicated some difficulties have been experienced, although all realised the importance and benefit of working together.

Key Findings

- The need for the proposals to be voluntary. Those parenting alone are not a homogenous group and applying a one-size-fits-all policy will simply not work for many of those parenting alone;

- The need to supply high-quality employment. If parents are to make work pay, it needs to be of a high quality and flexible enough to allow parents to be parents first and then employees;

- Service providers, statutory in particular, need to be encouraged to coordinate their services to meet the needs of those parenting alone. If education and training are key planks of the proposals, organisations in these areas need to be resourced so as to effectively target those parenting alone with a variety of services and interventions tailored to their needs, at times which suit the service users. Targeting by other service providers, such as housing authorities, would also relieve some pressure on those parenting alone;

- Both at a national and local level the primary service provider, the DSFA, is under resourced in meeting the needs of those parenting alone. Other actors identified an information gap when thinking about those parenting alone;

- Many statutory agencies are bound by rules and regulations to the extent that they cannot respond to the needs of individuals in exceptional circumstances;

- The impact of the withdrawal of secondary benefits and allowances is detrimental to the lives of those parenting alone and their children. The fear of losing benefits deters many parents from contemplating engaging in paid employment;

- Rural actors identified an unwillingness by statutory organisations to provide services in rural areas and an inability by parents to access services due to transport or childminding problems;

- Those parenting alone experience a huge number of universal and individual difficulties in their lives. The lack of self-esteem and confidence-building programmes affects the ability of those parenting alone to engage with services and opportunities for employment and education;

- While there is evidence to suggest that interagency collaboration, both between government departments and local service providers, is occurring, it is fraught with difficulty and stymied by some representatives not being fully engaged in the process;

- There is a need to address the inadequate supply of affordable and accessible childcare provision in the City and County. The inability of housing authorities to locate families in desired areas where supports may be available is another problem which should be addressed.

7. Discussion

The participants in this study describe the difficulties of daily living for those parenting alone. Any process which results in education, training and/or employment must take account of a number of barriers identified by the participants. Chief among these is the concern the participants expressed about caring for their children. The parents involved in this research very much view themselves, first and foremost, as primary carers for their children. Yet other barriers also exist. These include information and knowledge of the mechanics of the welfare system, the need to have high-quality, flexible employment, affordable, accessible childcare, and the need to build confidence and self-esteem.

Key Findings

- Aspirations and Willingness to Work

  Being in paid employment would ensure that there is more money coming in and is certainly a strong motivational factor in the parents desire to work. The respondents in both the survey and the interviews showed a willingness to engage in education, training and employment. The research findings clearly indicate that the transition from welfare to work is not straightforward. Instead, those parenting alone face many barriers preventing them from engaging in employment and education. In engaging these parents a high degree of understanding of individual circumstances is required, particularly around parenting and the needs of the family.

- Parenting Alone

  While policymakers see this proposal as having a minimal impact on parenting, both the survey and interviews with one parent families suggest this to be one of the primary considerations the parents have when entering and remaining in education or employment. The parents' decision surrounding involvement in employment or education is primarily dependent on whether or not it will impact negatively on their children. While wanting to work, what parents desire is employment that enables them to look after their children in a manner which the parent thinks is best for their child.

- Poverty Traps and Secondary Benefits

  Adult poverty, child poverty and child well being will only be addressed if the family's financial situation improves as a result of going back to work. Yet employment and poverty traps (in particular those relating to Rent Supplement, the Medical Card and the Back to School Allowance) form a significant barrier for participants entering education, training or employment. The over exposure of the participants in this study to the private rental market means entering well paid employment could leave them less well off.

- Lack of Supports

  Informal supports from the extended family for those parenting alone assists them in coping and dealing with the stress and demands of caring for their children. The absence of close family support, mainly due to geographic distance, can lead to greater social exclusion and isolation for those parenting alone. Parents' already limited ability to become involved in activities outside the home is further curtailed by such an absence. This lack of involvement leads to even greater exclusion as opportunities to create other forms of social networks and support are restricted.

- Lack of Affordable and Accessible Childcare

  Very few of the participants in the study have experiences with formal childcare. This was due to a preference for informal childcare arrangements and difficulties in accessing affordable childcare throughout the City and County. Those parents who could not avail of informal arrangements are prevented from looking for employment until their children begin school, as the cost of childcare was seen as prohibitive. As the proposals stand, there is an implicit assumption that childcare will not be

a significant issue in the parent's decision to take up employment, as the children will be in school. However, thought does not appear to have been given to school holidays and what happens should the children become ill, or the reality that not all employment opportunities coincide with school hours.

- Lack of Suitable Skills, Work Experience and Self-Confidence

There is a strong desire amongst the respondents to engage in further education and training prior to entering paid employment. Access to such services is limited for those parents living in the County. As with employment, even though education is a priority for many of the respondents, they will only engage in training that is available to them at a time that suits them and their children, with a preference for part-time courses run locally when the children are in school. A lack of relevant work experience was preventing some participants who have recently engaged in education and training from subsequently finding relevant employment.

- Lack of Information Regarding Services and Entitlements

Parents found dealing with agencies quite difficult, primarily because some agencies are not forthcoming with information about entitlements and services. It appears that the onus is on the individual to find out about what is available to them. The rules and regulations surrounding services and entitlements are regarded as far from straight forward. A lack of complete information prevents some parents from exploring options available to them, as does the greater fear of losing benefits. The welfare code is extremely complicated and difficult to understand, particularly in relation to what happens when someone who is in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment and secondary benefits takes up paid employment. Implementation of any activation measures will require agencies to be more pro-active in providing information in a straightforward user-friendly manner.

- Lack of Specific Services for Those Parenting Alone

At present many services provided for those parenting alone are grouped in with other target groups. While some participants spoke of having a positive experience when dealing with service providers in the statutory arena, the majority recounted difficulties in dealing with them. As already outlined, many participants suffer from a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. However, personnel working with service providers which cater for those parenting alone have in some cases come across as intimidating and overpowering, discourteous and unprofessional, making parents feel overwhelmed and further damaging their confidence. Statutory offices can be daunting places, and although some agencies have catered for those parenting alone in recent times, there is still much room for improvement. Quite often one bad experience with one representative of an agency can leave a lasting impact on the respondents and can often make them reluctant to return to that agency for information.

- Lack of Flexible, High Quality, Well-Paid Employment

315 of the respondents to the survey have looked for employment in the last 12 months. More broadly, many of those in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment who work do so on a part-time, low-pay basis. The low-pay aspect is perceived as the exchange for greater flexibility afforded by part-time work. While such a trade-off may suit those parenting alone, many felt that they were under utilised in their jobs while there. This research has highlighted that one of the primary barriers to those parenting alone is the lack of flexible employment which will result in an increase in income levels. Service providers interviewed identified the difficulties parents will encounter in securing flexible, high quality well paid employment which is part-time and family friendly. This will be even more difficult for those parents located in rural areas who experience aggravating issues such as lack of transport, accessible childcare and support networks.

8. Recommendations

In light of the findings and discussion the research team would like to make the following recommendations:

Parenting

- In terms of the current policy proposals we recommend that the activation process be voluntary. An activation process built on employment may be damaging to one of Irish society's family forms most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. Those parenting alone are on a continuum of ability to engage in paid employment with some more ready than others. Whilst many parents are ready to begin the activation process some are not in a position to do so. Forcing them to take up paid employment before they are ready will undermine their role as primary care givers, exacerbate their already low levels of self-esteem and endanger the stability of the family unit.

- Even if the policy proposals are proceeded with on a compulsory basis we recommend that it not be implemented until all mechanisms to support the proposals are firmly established. To implement the proposals at present may undermine the activation process. National policy actors need to provide resources and establish procedures for local service providers to prepare themselves to implement this set of proposals.

- The activation process must begin by taking into account the individual circumstance and parenting needs of each One Parent Family Recipient. Initiation of the activation process must begin by addressing the self-identified needs and aspirations of the parent with regard to education and employment. These needs and aspirations must remain central to the activation process throughout its implementation

Poverty Traps

- The Rental Accommodation Scheme can provide those parenting alone with secure and permanent housing and leave them less exposed to the vagaries of the private rental market. We recommend that the scheme be rolled-out as soon as is possible so that all vulnerable groups in need of permanent housing be accommodated under the scheme.

- We recommend that the way benefits and entitlements interact to cause poverty traps be reviewed and a more flexible approach be adopted to the administration of secondary benefits in the meantime.

- Individual parents beginning the activation process must have their own benefit situation investigated to ensure that none are worse-off for taking up paid employment.

Supports for those parenting alone

- There is a need to explore the introduction of intervention programmes to assist those parenting alone cope with the demands around parenting through capacity building and self development, in particular, for young parents and those who have recently experienced the breakdown of a relationship.

- We recommend that the issue of providing support for children in one parent families in Galway City and County be explored, with particular reference to those children whose parents are separating due to the breakdown of a marriage or long term relationship.

- We recommend that the establishment of locally based support groups throughout Galway City and County be encouraged as this would provide an important source of informal support where those parenting alone can support one another in a non-judgmental and positive environment

- The formal family support interventions already in existence in Galway City and County should be explored with regard to what local service providers can do to enhance informal and formal supports to One Parent Families.

Education, skills and work experience

- We recommend that the individual education, training and employment history of those involved in the activation process be built upon. This will involve recognising their existing strengths and working with the parents to identify areas where they need training or upskilling in order to achieve their preferred type of employment.

- We recommend that all education and training for those parenting alone are grounded on personal development and capacity building as well as supporting individuals in their role as parents.

- We recommend that education and training providers in Galway City and County explore the possibility of including a work placement inbuilt in the course or supervised period of work experience on completion of their course work which would be supportive of individuals in their role as parents

- Whilst we recognise the resource limitations, local service providers need to be more focused in addressing the educational and training needs of those living in rural areas and examine more creative ways to provide locally based courses in these areas.

Childcare and the needs of adolescents

- Family members and friends of those parenting alone who are already engaged in the provision of informal childcare, or are thinking of doing so, need to be made aware of how they register as a childminder and the tax and benefits implications of so doing.

- Childcare financial supports provided by education and training providers need to be reviewed and kept in line with real price increases in childcare in Galway City and County.

- The provision of additional affordable community based childcare facilities should be developed in Galway City and County.

- Creative and innovative ways in which care can be provided outside of the home for older children and young adolescents need to be explored and fostered in Galway City and County. This should consider both after school activities as well as well as covering school holiday periods.

Information

- We recommend the creation of a self contained booklet with all the relevant information for those parenting alone regarding benefits, entitlements, education and training and opportunities as well as supports for re-entering the labour market in Galway City and County be produced. Such a booklet should contain information on all agencies working with those who parent alone and include contact names, email address, webpage and telephone numbers. This booklet should be posted out to all currently in receipt of OPFP and handed out by the DSFA to new claimants during their initial interview.

- In particular, such information needs to contain user friendly accounts and examples of how the OPFP, as well as secondary benefits, will be affected should a parent return to work.

- We recommend that an internet portal be established whereby those parenting alone can easily access current information to a range of services in Galway City and County, voluntary and statutory, and that this be publicised extensively.

- We recommend that when inquiring about benefits and entitlements individuals are given a checklist of all the information and paperwork that is required from them to successfully complete the application process.
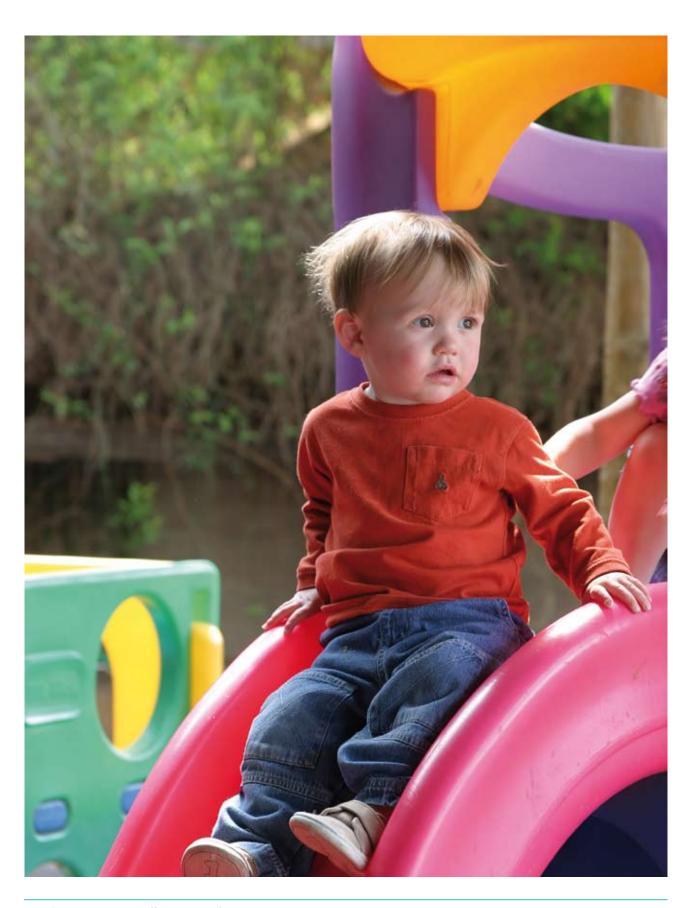
- As the research highlighted the high costs associated with contacting agencies particularly by telephone, we recommend that agencies explore the possibility of introducing free-phone numbers or a text service in which the agency can call the individual back.

Family Friendly Employment
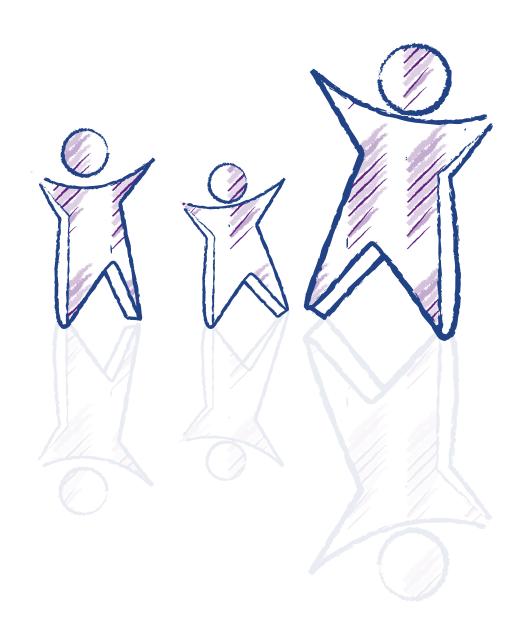
- We recommend that employers in Galway City and County and their representatives be encouraged to engage with the ROPE Committee processes.

- Employers in Galway City and County need to be consulted in order to understand the demand for flexible part-time work and how they might be assisted in employing interested parents in such work.

- We recommend that ROPE examine the possibility of entering into a pilot programme of employment with a large locally based employer or a number of smaller employers who offer flexible part-time employment suited to the needs of those parenting alone.

Service Provision

- We recommend the training of those front-line staff that interact with those who parent alone in Galway City and County so as to ensure they are aware of the needs and experiences of the individuals they come in contact with.

- We recommend that dedicated staff groupings dealing with those parenting alone be established in agencies involved in the activation process. Such attachment with this particular group would improve the experiences of those parenting alone as well establishing a network of core front line staff across the statutory and voluntary sector

- We recommend that senior management in those agencies in Galway City and County working for and with those parenting alone establish a forum for information sharing and strategic, seamless collaboration so as to improve services and outcomes for those parenting alone. This forum should include all organisations: community, voluntary and statutory.

Chapter One
Introduction to the study

1.1 Introduction

In early 2006 Galway City Partnership (GCP) concluded focus group work with one-parent family welfare recipients interested in setting up a business from home. The final report stimulated much broader discussions and it soon became apparent that in order to find more out about the key barriers, which prevented those parenting alone from progression into mainstream employment, comprehensive baseline data would be required. The need to establish baseline data on the reality of life for those parenting alone in Galway City and County was identified as important by a group of local service providers. This group became known as ROPE2. In March 2006, GCP submitted a funding proposal via Galway City Development Board to the Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform. Funding under Strand A – 'to increase the understanding of and capacity to respond to the labour market needs and social inclusion of those parenting alone' was subsequently approved. The successful funding application enabled GCP to leverage additional funding to commission the Child and Family Research Centre in NUI-Galway to undertake this major piece of research into the labour market needs of those parenting alone in Galway City and County.

This research report also comes at a time of growing national interest in those parenting alone, in particular the introduction of recent policy proposals Government Discussion Paper: Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents (DSFA, 2006). The research was designed to gather basic information about the past and current level of engagement of those parenting alone in the labour market and their experiences of this process. Particularly, the research was interested in the barriers to engagement with education, training or taking up employment and the barriers for those who do, to remain there. Likewise the research sought to identify those facilitative factors that enabled/would enable those who parent alone to engage with the labour market and education in a way that would improve life for them and their children in a positive manner. It was hoped that the research would identify ways in which the ROPE committee could actively engage with those parenting alone so as to socially include them.

1.2 Background of the Study

This research is central to making the connection between broad policy aims in relation to one parent families and the specific local experience of policy implementation. In a cross cutting policy domain such as this, detailed knowledge of on the ground experiences of service users and agencies is crucial to fine-tuning policy. For many of the approximately 7,000 one parent family households and the 3,000 recipients of the One-Parent Family Payment in Galway City and County, such policy fine-tuning can make a significant impact on their day to day lives (CSO, 2003; DSFA, 2006a).

This research takes place in the context of major policy changes in relation to one parent families, particularly in terms of existing barriers to entering the labour market and / or education and training. State interest in this area can be seen as reflecting both a conviction that employment is a key strategy for poverty reduction and concerns with the financial costs of welfare provision and social costs of welfare dependency. This follows a European trend, whereby activation via paid work is regarded as the primary means of promoting social inclusion and participation. The most concrete expression in Ireland of the changes ahead has come in the Government Discussion Paper: Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents. These proposals suggest that policy changes are likely to involve major reform in welfare support for those parenting alone (DSFA, 2006). Specifically, these proposals suggest replacing the One Parent Family Payment and Qualified Adults Allowance with a single Parental Allowance for parents of children up to age seven, and Job Seekers Allowance for parents with children over seven. Critically, this new allowance will incorporate conditionality in payment, with those parenting alone in receipt of the payment expected to begin connecting to the labour market as their children approach the upper age limit for payment of the Parental Allowance.

The issues for one-parent families are more complicated than the form of welfare payment and associated conditions of qualification. Thus, while the assumption is that paid work will ultimately lead to social inclusion for those parenting alone and their children, as Coakley (2005) identifies, the working poor represent a significant minority of those in poverty. OPEN argue that if those parenting alone are to work their way out of poverty they must have access to training and education opportunities valued by 'quality employers' and if not, the proposed reforms will push those parenting alone into 'dead-end jobs' and 'simply

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2   Refer to Appendix for a list of the Steering Group.

swell the ranks of the working poor'. This is particularly important given the low level of educational qualification of significant proportion of those one parenting alone (OPEN, 2006). A wider question for consideration is the relative value placed on care and employment in relation to long-term outcomes for children.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

At the outset, in collaboration with the project steering group the aims of this research were defined as:

i. To develop a defined model of engagement setting out the processes needed to help facilitate the social inclusion of one-parent families and their participation in the labour market.

ii. To identify ways in which local agencies can respond more imaginatively to the social inclusion and labour market needs of one-parent families.

Due to a number of reasons that emerged as the research progressed, it was necessary to reconsider the central aims of the research in conjunction with the steering group. It became apparent that due to the depth of the data collected, to fully comprehend the reality of the challenges that face one-parent families in Galway it would be more effective to focus on the issues raised in the research findings within this document. It was felt that to try to do this and develop of a model of engagement between service providers and those parenting alone within the limited time frame, the importance of both would be lost. It was also felt that it was important to engage with the parents that participated in the study after the data had been analyzed to present the findings of the research back to the group and get feedback for the development of the model of engagement.

At the outset the objectives of the research were to:

i. Provide baseline data and detailed analysis of the current situation for one-parent families in Galway City and County areas.

ii. Provide details of current social inclusion provision provided by agencies and groups for One Parent Families.

iii Identify an agreed set of quantified objectives in terms of desired outcomes for One Parent Families.

iv. Achieve agreement on the responsibilities and role of each organisation involved in meeting these objectives.

v. Identify realistic performance indicators to monitor progress in terms of these agreed objectives and actions.

The first two objectives (i and ii) have been fulfilled in Chapter 3 and 4; 5 and Chapter 6 respectively. For the reasons outlined above objectives iii to v have not been addressed in this report. Rather, the findings of this research should provide the basis for further developments in the engagement process between the agencies involved in this study and one-parent families.

1.4 Methodology

This study took place over a nine month period. The initial phase involved clarifying the project objectives and establishing the project model of work in conjunction with the Project Steering Group. The study consisted of a theoretical part and an empirical part. The theoretical parts of the project included an extensive literature review. This was compiled by Dr. Mary Murphy, N.U.I, Maynooth. This review included analysis of recent publications discussing methodological approaches to researching those parenting alone (e.g. Collins et al., 2006). This was done with the intention of identifying any existing codes of best practice in researching one parent families and to source and possible adopt existing research tools (e.g. survey questionnaires, interview guidelines). The literature review provided the context for the empirical research and informed the development of the research instruments to be used in the research. The review includes Irish and relevant international policy. The review focuses on policy

and research literature in the following areas: 'Ethics of care' models that support those parenting alone to care for their children and the notion of one parent families and social inclusion, poverty. It also looks in particular at the literature concerning those parenting alone and education/training and work; the barriers to entering work/education/training (childcare, housing, welfare benefit withdrawal) and the supports and resources required. We also examine the international experience of those parenting alone in labour market activation processes.

The empirical part of the One Parent Family Study targeted policy makers, service providers and service users. Data collection was based on a multi-method strategy consisting of a) a questionnaire survey for OPFP recipients in Galway City and County, b) semi-structured interviews with those parenting alone in selected locations and c) a set of qualitative interviews with policy actors involved in the design and delivery of services for one parent families. Following the principles of good practice in multi-method social research (cf. Bryman 1988; Finch and Mason 1993), we adopted a comparative approach to the data analysis process which revealed major similarities but also some differences between all three sets of data.

The One Parent Family Questionnaire Survey (OPFQ)

The One Parent Family Questionnaire Survey was intended to generate large-scale statistical information about the situation of one parent families in Galway City and County. Preparation work for the design of the QPFQS questionnaire was based on an existing list of proposed questions to measure choices and constraints (Collins et al., 2006) which was used to conduct research on those parenting alone and work in the UK.[3] The final draft of the OPFQ questionnaire included some of these questions drawn from Collins et al. (2006) which were subsequently modified to suit the conditions in Galway City and County (including changes in how questions are phrased to reflect local use of language). Further questions were added which dealt with issues other than those identified in the UK study (e.g. accessibility, transport, location – urban/rural; see Appendix 2).

A preliminary draft of the questionnaire was submitted to Galway City Partnership for feedback which resulted in further modifications. Furthermore, a small pilot survey (n=12) was conducted to assure maximum comprehensibility and to enhance the quality of the questionnaire by eliminating and/or rephrasing any ambiguous questions before conducting the full-scale survey. The revised questionnaire was subsequently posted to 3,144 recipients of the OPFP who resided in Galway City or County at the time of the survey (February 2007).[4] To enhance response rates and recruit volunteers for the qualitative interviews with single parents, the questionnaire mail shot also included an entry form for a prize draw (see Appendix 2) and respondents were asked for their participation in the subsequent interviewing process. The overall response rate of the survey was 22% and the resulting pool of contact addresses for voluntary interviewees was sufficient.

Overall, the OPFQ proved successful in yielding large-scale quantitative information that made visible trends in the living conditions of one parent families in Galway City and County, their views regarding work and education and potential barriers to re-entering the labour force or returning to education/training. The survey results were subsequently compared to the qualitative interview data to identify differences and similarities. The comparative analysis revealed a high degree of consistency, with many of the key issues raised in the survey re-emerging in the qualitative interview data.

Qualitative Interviews with those parenting alone

For the qualitative interviews with those parenting alone, a sample for the interviews was developed based on the self-selection of respondents of the survey. Of the 676 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 235 self-selected for interview. From

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3   We should like to thank Debbie Collins, Michelle Gray, Susan Purdon and Alice McGee for their permission to use and modify their set of questions used to investigate those parenting alone and work. Their input was greatly appreciated.

4   At all times the confidentiality of those being surveyed remained intact. Envelopes were packed at NUI, Galway and then delivered to the DSFA to have the addresses affixed to the envelope by DSFA staff. The envelopes were then returned to the mail room at NUI Galway where they were franked this was overseen by an Officer of the DSFA. On arrival of the completed questionnaires, any material with personal details was immediately separated to ensure anonymity. The prize draw for three 'one for all' vouchers took place in the presence of the Galway City Partnership committee and the winners were subsequently contacted by the research team.

this data base, a sample of 60 parents were selected in relation to key areas of interest of the research; for example, reflecting age, gender, locality, employment status, ethnicity, age of children and number of children. The main considerations in the development of this sample were location – there was a fifty/fifty balance between City and County with an added concern for a balance between the urban centres and the rural parts of the County, the geographical spread of the one-parent families and a balance between east and west, with consideration also for the Gaeltacht regions. The sample also reflects the age of the respondents to ensure a mix between older and younger. Care was also taken to reflect the education and training levels of the respondents. Finally we aimed to include a combination of those with one child and those with more than one child to ensure a representation of the voice of both.

Informed consent was sought from each interviewee. The interview was recorded and transcribed; at this stage the participants' names were changed to protect anonymity. The respondents were reimbursed with a supermarket voucher in acknowledgement their time. To compliment the survey, interviews allowed for the generation of more in-depth qualitative accounts of the experiences of those parenting alone. Qualitative data from interviews with those parenting alone was structured so that the analysis focused on perspectives on key questions and issues directly addressed in the interview guide (see Appendix 3). A thematic analysis was then undertaken in pursuit of additional themes and issues emerging during the research. The qualitative data analysis programme NVivo was used as a tool to support this part of the work.

Interviews with Policy Actors and Local Service Providers

Interviews with policy makers and service providers aimed to access both national and local knowledge of providers on the influences design and proposed implementation of the policy, and in generating insights on how to respond more imaginatively to labour market and social inclusion needs of one-parent families. The research team selected national policy actors to be interviewed by way of identifying members of the Senior Officials Group on Social Inclusion. (DSFA, 2006). In addition, other state bodies were approached and asked to contribute to the research. Further to these, it was felt that it would be prudent to interview actors from organisations representing those parenting alone. At the local level the research team identified a number of service organisations whom it was felt would have a significant degree of experience in working with those parenting alone. These organisations spanned both the statutory and voluntary sector.

1.5 Ethics

The research was guided by key ethical requirements of doing no harm and gaining informed, voluntary consent for participation in the research. Participants indicated their willingness to participate when they filled in the survey and provided their contact details for an interview. Initially these respondents were contacted by telephone where the process was explained and they were invited for interview. All those who took part in individual interviews were asked for and gave their consent. Anonymity was guaranteed for all participants and therefore names and identifiable personal details throughout the report have been changed.

1.6 Methodological limitations

While this research has been wide ranging in its aims and its achievements, there were certain methodological limitations to the study. The survey asserts a 22% response rate which is quite favourable in this type of survey; however one cannot ignore the high non-response rate. It should be considered that literacy and language competency are barriers to survey completion and this could have been an exclusionary factor. Furthermore the interviewees were self-selected respondents of the survey questionnaire. It should also be considered that to come forward for an interview requires a certain amount of self-esteem and confidence and therefore may have excluded the more vulnerable sectors of this group.

1.7 Report structure

Following this introduction, the report is structured into eight chapters. Chapter two provides a comprehensive literature review of an international and domestic literature concerning those parenting alone. It begins with an investigation of models based on an ethics of care model discusses why these are most appropriate when working with vulnerable groups around work activation. It then examines the international experience of work activation of those parenting alone. It then focuses on the experience of parenting alone in Ireland beginning with a summary of qualitative and quantitative data on social exclusion.
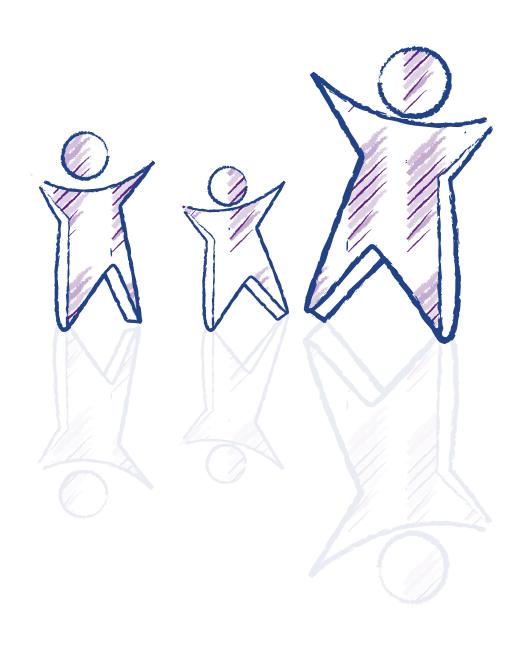
Chapter three provides the results of the questionnaire survey sent to recipients of the One Parent Family Payment (OPFP) in the two local authorities. The main aim of the survey was to establish the demographic profile of this group and to explore the quality of life of one parent families in Galway City and County, their social support networks and, most importantly, their views of the opportunities and barriers that are likely to affect their future engagement in education, training, or paid work.

Chapters four and five presents the findings from the qualitative interviews carried out with one parent families who are in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment and living in Galway City or County. It provides an overview of the main issues raised by the participants. Chapter four focuses on the daily lives and experiences of those parenting alone and chapter five considers the barriers to education and employment and training. Chapter six details how the parents involved in the study have engaged with local service providers5. The views and experiences of parents in engaging with these services are presented.

Chapter seven addresses issues arising out of a series of interviews undertaken with policy actors at both the national and local level. These interviews sought to identify what the impact of the current proposals might be on parenting and children; the impetus for the development of the proposals; consultation around the development of the proposals; wider concerns about the proposals; issues pertaining to the implementation of the proposals; inter-agency collaboration; the perceptions of key policy actors; perceptions of existing services at local level; and perceptions of issues and barriers to the uptake of training and employment opportunities for those parenting alone. Chapter eight amalgamates and discusses the main messages arising from the primary data that this research has generated, together with the analysis of current literature and the current policy context. Chapter nine presents the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

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5 Participants were asked about specific agencies and also about those who support them in parenting the agencies listed in this report is not an exhaustive list of statutory and voluntary services available to those parenting in Galway City and County.

Chapter Two
Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter comprises of an international and domestic literature of issues concerning those parenting alone. The aim of the literature review was to provide the context for the empirical research to be undertaken and to inform the development of the research instruments to be used in the empirical research. It begins with an investigation of models based on an ethics of care model and discusses why these are most appropriate when working with vulnerable groups around work activation. It then examines the international experience of work activation of those parenting alone. It then focuses on the experience of parenting alone in Ireland beginning with a summary of qualitative and quantitative data on social excision and reviewing recent literature relating to the interaction of those parenting alone with education, training and employment. It concludes by sketching barriers to progression and recent proposals to introduce work activation for those parenting alone.

2.2 The ethics of care, childcare, child well-being and parental health.

Daly and Klammer (2005) point out that 'many mothers feel torn between children and work'. Coakley (2005: 3) and Daly and Leonard (2002: 16) reflect that Irish mothers decisions are mediated primarily by childcare responsibilities and parental responsibility is prioritised over financial gain. However overall there is little Irish research to establish what combination of work and parenting low income women want.6 International qualitative studies highlight ambiguity about mothers' attitudes to labour market participation. People are emotional affective beings (Lynch and Baker, 2005) and mothers negotiate the world of work from a different financial, practical and emotional starting point of a 'moral economy'. Duncan et al., (2003) argue that failing to account for the ethic of care leads to a 'rationality mistake' where there is an over focus on financial considerations of making work pay at the expense of accommodating care. Idealisation of an adult worker model is based on an unreal assumption of reality of care, which impacts badly on 'affective' equality (Pascall and Lewis, 2005: Lyons and Lynch, 2005). A welfare to work policy informed by an ethics of care would facilitate adult workers to care, encourage family-friendly work practice and facilitate adequate parental leave over the life time of the child in a way that addresses family based gender inequality (McAuley, 2005; Lewis, 2005: 167, Bradshaw et al., 2003). Duncan and Edwards (1997) warn against 'economic citizenship'. Framing the anti poverty debate around work requirements can reinforce a type of 'neo liberal individualism' which fails to acknowledge the constraints implied by human interdependency (Shaver et al., 1999).

Williams (2004: 13) argues that what is needed is a political principle about care which is equivalent to the principle about paid work and that makes care as central to the concept of citizenship as paid work and requires men to change their behaviour or broaden the scope of their activities. While the strong focus on paid work in present social inclusion discourse makes it more difficult to recognise care obligations and to value and support care work (Pascall & Lewis 2004: 261). Ironically there is a parallel societal ethos of respecting (and facilitating through the tax system) support for full time mothering (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001).

Class and race is a defining feature of women's lives. Armstrong (2006 2.4) argues family backgrounds shape access to financial, informational and network resources. It is not necessarily presence or absence of partners that influences decisions about combining motherhood and work. Middle class women primarily self identify as workers and working class women primarily as mothers. Positive maternal identity is a key identity for working class women who have always juggled care and work but may identify more with being a mother. Edin and Kefelas (2005: 204) found that the poor ascribe a higher value to children than the middle class this is due to an opportunity cost but also 'stronger absolute preferences, which lead them to put children rather than marriage, education or career at the centre of their meaning making activity'7. While middle class childrearing norms focused on long-term outcomes, good mothering for some low-income mothers meant 'being there'.

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6   At the time of writing One Parent are undertaking a quantitative study of one-parent families and work.

7   Teen motherhood rather than paid employment can be the central identity in transition to adulthood motherhood is a secure adult identity (Graham and McDermott, 2006).

Likewise in the event of women working there are class differences in the experience of what it means to juggle between motherhood and work. Armstrong (2006) differentiates types of flexibility where middle class women have capital resources to negotiate flexibility but where working class women are required to be flexible (she points out that for middle class women to be flexible often means working class women being flexible for them). Dean (2001: 283) found a qualitative difference between middle and working class mothers experience of working or between 'career jobs' and work to supplement family income. In Ireland Russell and Corcoran (2001) connected higher education with transition into well-paid jobs (Coakley, 2005:15).

Race also defines women's approach to employment. In Ireland debate about race or ethnicity has been to date largely limited to issues associated with the Traveller Community. Recent migration trends require sensitivity to emerging ethnic trends and needs. There are already significant numbers of African and Romanian one-parent families. There are differences in labour market participation between ethnic groups with Afro Caribbean women having high rates of those parenting alone in the labour market and Pakistani women the opposite. The evaluation of the UK New Deal for Lone Parents (Holland, 2005) showed those without English as a first language were least likely to enter employment after Work Focused Interviews. Some migrant one-parent families, who within two years of receipt of residency must find paid employment or risk the ultimate sanction of deportation, have urgent labour market needs. Therefore, if using the case managers or mediator model, diversity and equality training must be included.

Up to now Irish social and fiscal policy strongly supported the choice to parent full time but there has been recent emphasis on increasing female labour market participation and encouraging low-income mothers into employment. The trend elsewhere has been to introduce work obligations for dependants in means tested payments, but without questioning about care obligations and without improving the quality of labour market conditions (Bennett, 2002: 565). The following chart represents a league table of countries with top place going to countries that incorporate an ethic of care into overall labour market policy. Those parenting alone do not necessarily requite differentiated policy but benefit from well-developed overall family friendly policy such as that found in Nordic countries. Without incorporating family friendly work policy into overall employment policy work activation of those parenting alone is unlikely to be sustainable.

Table 2.1: Work/home care incentive indicators of family policies in various countries

Country	Paid MB	Extended leave	Paid extended leave	Home incentive index	Separate taxation	Sick child leave	Day care coverage	Work incentive	Family friendly policy index
FIN	+++	+++	=	7	+	+	++	4	11
BEL	++	++	+	5	-	+	++	3	8
SWED	+++	+	+	5	+	+	++	4	9
DEN	++	+	-	3	+	-	++	3	6
FRA	+	+++	+	5	-	-	++	2	7
NRW	++	++	-	4	+	+	+	3	7
GER	+	+	+	3	-	+	+	2	5
ITA	++	+	+	4	-	+	+	2	5
NL	+	++	-	3	+	-	-	1	4
SP	+	+++	-	4	-	+	+	2	6
UK	+	+	-	2	-	+	+	2	6
AUS	-	++	-	2	+	-	-	1	3
USA	+	-	-	1	+	-	-	1	2
IRL	+	+	-	2	-	-	+	1	3

Source: Forssen & Hakovirta, 2000: 6 (Ireland added by author)

Care is the most important criteria or significant influence in determining a mother's labour market entry (Skevik, 2005: 6). The general childcare debate in Ireland is well rehearsed in NWCI (2005) and Coakley (2005). Tensions arise in the every day child co-ordination practises of those parenting alone or in a couple. Those parenting alone strategise to cope with the time pressure of care and work. Leira et al., (2005) highlight how proximity to informal care supports is important and in its absence time, transport and co-ordination is crucial. Tobio and Trifiletti (2005) identified temporal, spatial and transport strategies women employ, to cope with new demands of care and paid employment. Those parenting alone have restricted capacity to travel to work outside local labour markets (Duggan and Loftus, 2006). Travel to work time of those parenting alone was significantly less than the average female travel to work time recorded in Census 2002 (Ralaheen, 2006: 23). Childcare strategies of those parenting alone involve packaging childcare, informal assistance from kinship networks and community and reciprocal exchanges. Such packages are highly individualised, creative and flexible. Crucially childcare services are only an element of the package. Making the strategy work requires keeping under control the 'complex texture of daily life' where 'a common cold is an organisational tragedy (Tobio and Trifiletti, 2005: 68) forcing some women to resort to sub optimal coping strategies based on no choice (for example phoning in sick, taking child to work or leaving a child home alone). Baldock and Hadlow (2004: 706) and Skinner (2003) suggest that time and co-ordination factors constrain work, limit productivity and curtail options.

The issue of the child's well being is crucial for those parenting alone and the impact of parental employment on child development is obviously a concern (O'Brien, 2004). Subjective financial well being is an important positive influence on children's psychological well being (McKeown and Hasse, 2006) but child well being only increases in the event of maternal employment if or when the mothers' employment actually increases household income (O'Brien, 2004). The direct impact of maternal employment on child well being is generally positive for children up to adolescence (Sawhill et al., 2002; Zaslow et al., 2002; Morris, 2002; Hamilton, 2002 cited in O'Brien, 2004). Enrolment in childcare means positive child development can result from a mothers return to work; this is even more likely in low income families. However for adolescent children the impact of imposing obligations to work on mothers has been more negative with evidence of a decline in school performance (Sawhill et al., 2002) emotional and behavioural problems and poor health status decline (Zaslow et al., 2002). This echoes fears voiced by one parent groups and focus groups with those parenting alone and primary carers (NAHB, 2003; NESF, 2002; DSFA, 2001; Duncan and Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Holland (2005) notes in the UK experience a specific problem of childcare affected many parents with children aged 12-15 caused by a combination of lack of out of school provision, parents unwillingness to leave child at home unattended and children's unwillingness to be 'child' minded. Evidence from New Zealand (Morris, 1999; MSD, 2002) reveals adolescents being left with the responsibility for care of the younger children. Morris (1999) and O' Brien (2004) highlight the stress on both mother and child when the parent is not 'available' to parent (a stress that may bear more heavily on a working class mother's personal ethic of care). Mothers were also sensitive to children's emotional needs in the context of difficult separation and divorce or bereavement (Holland, 2005).

Baker and Tippin (2004) highlighted the issue of how managing children's ill health impacted on mother's employment possibilities. Children's ill health or even periodic illness makes retaining full-time and part-time work difficult. They also stressed issues of leaving behaviourally 'difficult to handle children' to the care of others or of leaving such children alone. High rates of mental distress, anxiety and depression in sole parents are an obstacle to employment (Edin and Lein, 1996). NDLP reviews show how health is a substantial and under appreciated barrier to employment (Holland, 2005). Baker and Tippin (2004) found up to 30% of those parenting alone are forced to reject employment because of their own health or because they care for another sick adult or child. Health has to be understood in the social context of mothers' lived experience and identity. Poor health compounds other obstacles such as the emotional impact of marriage breakdown, continuing disputes with former partners and coping with children's behavioural problems, mental health, feeling of depression and a general absence of emotional well being and difficultly managing (Baker and Tippin, 2004: 102).

Brunton (2006) refers to questions of choice and control about work and parenting and 'spill-over'. Negative spill-over occurs when people feel a mismatch between ideal hours and real hours, when they feel overworked, too tired to pay attention to things at home, distracted by work worries, stressed and withdrawn from children. With positive spill there is job satisfaction, improved home life, wider social networks and enhanced personal psychological functioning of the parent (Parcel et al., 1996:208). The lack of control and choice associated with a low quality job and bad working conditions also can also contribute to deterioration

in health (Worth et al., 2004). The fatigue of juggling paid work and caring responsibilities and managing a tight budget caused extreme stress with physical symptoms and work can exacerbate health discrepancies. Sutton et al., (2004) highlight specialised needs of women with particular health issues. Programmes dealing with women drug users need to examine barriers posed by the 'risk of children being taken away' and losing custody as well as distinct needs of women who have suffered domestic violence and whose violent partners employ physical means to stop them obtaining or returning to work, or those who may have chaotic life styles (Dean, 2003).

Sweeney (2002: 49), Ellwood (2000: 195), Nicaise (1998: 29) and Mooney (2004: 111) argue that it may not be socially optimal or reasonable to expect or require low skilled women who have to provide all social, emotional and practical domestic family support to take up employment. The alternative allocation of time for parental responsibility is not necessarily less optimal than a low paid unprotected and stultifying job8. Conroy (2001) argues that 'attaching an unequal social security system to an unequal labour market will surely double the risk of unequal treatment for women'.

Table 2.2: Work testing those parenting alone

Country	Dependant on age of child	Age of child	% Lone mothers[14] with dependant children who are employed
Australia	Y	5	46 (2000)
Austria	Y subject to childcare	3	80 (1999)
Belgium	Discretion	-	59 (1997)
Canada	Yes	6	51 (1996)
Denmark	No subject to childcare	-	73 (1995)
Finland	Y	4	65 (1998)
France	-	-	66 (2001)
Germany	Y	3	67 (2000)
Greece	-	-	75 (1996)
Ireland	-	-	53 (1999)
Israel	Y	7	N/a
Italy	Y	3	65 (1998)
Japan	Y	1	83 (1999)
Luxembourg	Y	6	82 (2000)
Netherlands	Y	5	42 (1997)
New Zealand	-	- (was 11)	45 (2001)
Norway	Y	3	68 (1999)
Portugal	-	-	88 (1996)
Spain	-	-	68 (1991)
Sweden	No	-	68 (1998)
UK	-	-	52 (2000)
US	Y	1 (3 mths)	68 (2000)

Source: Millar, 2005.

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8   Mooney cites the well-known example that occurred in Feb 2000 in Flint Michigan USA. Tamarla Owens a lone mother in Flint Michigan was working on a compulsory welfare to work programme in a grill bar (in a city a three hour round trip away from her home) when her six year old boy shot dead a 6 year old girl Michaela Boland with a gun he had taken from his uncles house where he was being minded before school began. This example highlights the co-ordination and scheduling challenges and highlights what happens when low-income mothers are forced to rely on 'weak links in the chain'.

2.3 International experience of work activation of those parenting alone

This section draws heavily on Millar's comprehensive review (2005:189-190) of how work requirements are applied to one-parent families in other countries. Table 2.2 above outlines policy on work testing for those parenting alone and employment rates for those parenting alone with dependant children. The general situation is that those parenting alone with children of school going age are expected to participate in some form of work activation (Millar, 2005: 192) but there is considerable difference concerning the actual application of a work requirement across and within different countries. In Germany, Austria and Demark the work test is conditional on guaranteed childcare place and even in the US the work test is only applied if childcare is available. Italy, Finland and Norway do not guarantee a childcare place but work test all parents. In Belgium and Netherlands there is significant local discretion while in Japan and Norway work tests are strictly applied in a national framework. Germany has a moderate work test aiming at part time work. Spain, France and Portugal have no work test but on the other hand have social integration clauses attached to receipt of minimum income; these can be related to labour market insertion.

There is also significant variation both negatively and positively in implementation over time and place within national policies with New Zealand and Canada both reversing previous work test policies (Breitkreuzm, 2005), the UK moving from a fully voluntary system to mandatory work focused interviews and Netherlands shifting age requirements from 12 in 1996 to five in 2002 (Knijin and Van Wel, 2004). The experience of implementation of work requirements varies across local labour markets and political boundaries, with variations in local attitudes to mothers working and national institutional responses to childcare provision. There is also significant variation in single parenting families, the processes by which different mothers become workers, the local and neighbourhood context of this process and the vastly different experiences, motivations and capacities of parents. Such variation means it is almost impossible to generalise about what works and what does not work. However, it is possible to make general observations that employment will be inadequate without facilitation of child, family friendly flexible work and parental care and social transfers to compensate for costs to parenting (Duncan and Edwards, 1997: 269) but it is hard to be specific about what works.

An OECD wide review of labour market activation evaluations shows little result from activation programmes (Martin et al., 2004). Nicaise et al., (2004: 15) argue that 1990 activation polices produced more exclusion than inclusion (with poor quality policies, carousel effects, displacement, experience of sanctions, lower benefits etc). This is supported by evaluations of the UK experience (DWP, 2002) that suggest those parenting alone are accessing low skilled and low paid work. Cebulla et al., (2004) who undertook a meta analysis of UK and US Welfare to Work outcomes found impacts were generally small, temporary and expensive to implement and that characteristics of the programme target group as well as local socio economic conditions were as important variables in determining outcomes as what type of programmes are run. Sanction based work did however increase earnings and reduce case load reductions. Ezawa and Fujiwara (2005), argue like Zhan and Pandey (2004) that alternatives such as post secondary education significantly improves single mothers economic status and argue strongly for designing human capital focused rather than work first focused activation policy. Various attempts have been made to define 'good' activation policy (EAPN, 2006). Nicaise (2005) stresses 'social inclusion' rather than not 'work-first' objectives. Hawkins (2005) stresses that personal and family sustainability includes economic security but also health and well-being, social environment and education. NESF (2006), EAPN (2006), and Murphy (2007) outline the features of good activation practice (outreach, minimal sanctions, high rates of payment in both work/welfare situations, prioritising 'education first' or 'human capital first' approaches, attention to the quality of the job, in job mentoring and progression, exemptions for social policy needs including child well being and social integration).

2.4 One-parent families, social inclusion and poverty.

Yeates (1997) and McCashin (2004) stress how, until recently, Irish policy (like Norway, New Zealand and Australia) firmly supported those parenting alone as parents not workers. Irish policy, by providing a specific payment to enable those providing full-time care giving, strongly recognised the social right to give and receive care (Slevik, 2005). The 1994 Lone Parent Allowance introduced disregards for income, travel and childcare to facilitate employment and participation in Active Labour Market

Programmes. Since 1997 all national anti-poverty discourse has focused on employment as the best route from poverty. There has been a distinct focus on accessing young, single, never married, low skilled, poorly educated mothers in urban areas into paid employment (McLaughlin and Rodgers, 1997: 27). McCashin (1996) argues that given the level of employment availability, childcare and prevailing attitudes this mixed welfare policy facilitating genuine choice for those parenting alone was (and is) preferable to moving too much towards a work obligation model. However a work obligation model is suggested in Proposals to Support Lone Parents (DSFA, 2006).

Prior to 1980's Ireland had low levels of single parents but since the 1980's experienced the European norm of 13-14% of households headed by one parent. Census figures show the number of households headed by one parent rising from 29,658 in 1981 to 90,906 in 1991, 150,634 in the 2002 census9[5]. While widowhood declined as a route into one-parenthood, marital breakdown and non-martial birth became an increasing cause of single parenthood with the latter the dominant entry point to one parent hood for OPFP recipients. The table shows how the number of those parenting alone now stands at 122,000 (10,000 of whom are male). This figure has increased by almost 80% in the past decade.

Table 2.3: One Parent Families with children aged under 20 by sex of parent, 1996-2005

000 families

Year	Male	Female	Total
1996	8.4	60.1	68.5
1997	8.1	65.6	73.7
1998	9.2	83.4	92.6
1999	9.9	78.1	88.0
2000	10.3	93.0	103.4
2001	10.5	102.9	113.3
2002	11.8	103.9	115.6
2003	10.0	105.5	115.6
2004	10.7	106.5	117.1
2005	10.1	111.9	122.0

Source: LFS (April 1996-1997) and QNHS (March –May, 1998-2005)

Of the 115,600 one parent families living in Ireland in 2002, 7,104 (15% of whom are male) lived in Galway. In 2005, 2,813 one parent family recipients living in Galway were dependant on the OPFP; and 929 families headed by one parent (comprising 40% of the total housing list) were awaiting council housing. The high risk of poverty of those parenting alone is an international concern (Council of Europe, 2006). 80% of one parent headed households were in receipt of some form of social welfare payment (ESRI, 2005). Despite high rates of work participation among those parenting alone those in receipt of OPFP are at the most extreme risk of poverty in the state with over 31.1% experiencing consistent poverty (compared to a national average of 6.8%) and with over 40% likely to experience debt OPEN 2005, SILC 2005). Children and adults in one parent households experiencing a 48.3% risk of experiencing poverty (SILC, 2004) compared to a national average of 19.4%. One-parent families headed by females experience a slightly higher risk of poverty than one-parent families headed by males. The present combination of child and adult social welfare payments is only 90% of what is required to lift one-parent families above the poverty line10[6].

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9   Alternative measurements from the QNHS recorded 178,800 one parent families in 2002 rising to 187,000 one parent families in 2005 (Ralaheen, 2006).

10   Despite increases over the last number of budgets analysis by OPEN 2006 shows the combination of social welfare supports for one-parent families (at €248.18 per week in 2006) to be up to €25 per week below what is required to be above the 2006 poverty line (estimated to be €273.62 per week).

Poverty is not distributed evenly across the country. Geographical distribution of one-parent families dependant on OPFP is heavily concentrated in Dublin (27,741 claimants) and other major cities like Cork, Limerick and Galway (which had 2,813 in 2005). Within these counties there is a further geographical clustering in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage (often CLÁR or RAPID areas). One-parent families living far from access to public transport or employment are particularly disadvantaged and have particular needs.

From an anti-poverty perspective such high risks of poverty can be decreased by increasing the rate of social welfare supports or by enabling as much as possible those families to reduce their dependency on social welfare supports. Both strategies are evident in Irish policy (Millar 2005); however the stress is on the latter. Exit routes from OPF payment dependency include cohabiting, marriage and /or taking up employment. Lack of divorce until recent times and consequent denial of the right to remarry and structural disincentives in the social welfare system means Ireland has always been characterized by relatively longer duration of single parenthood (the average length of claim being 12 years: DSFA, 2001; Murphy, 2003; NESF, 2002). The DSFA (2006) Proposals to Support Lone Parents contains innovative policy reforms, to eliminate the cohabitation rule, abolish the one parent family payment and replace it with a low-income parental allowance until the child is eight. It opens up significant constructive family formation proposals for one-parent families. The second exit route, employment, is heavily promoted in various national antipoverty plans, national employment actions plans and the EU NAPS. Given the difference in poverty risk between employed (risk is 11%) and non-employed parents (whose risk is 37%) a pro-employment strategy makes sense. This report also focuses on measures to support and oblige those parenting alone to take up employment (DSFA, 2006).

There is a gap in both qualitative and quantitative research relating to those parenting alone. Qualitative research commissioned by DSFCA (2000), NESF (2001) and CPA (Daly and Leonard, 2002) suggests that mothers parenting alone are positively and extensively involved in caring for children but are also ambitious to engage to in paid employment. While positive orientation to paid work is subordinated to the primary function of mother, there is a nonetheless a 'mothers and workers' approach (Russell and Corcoran, 2001: 20) albeit that interest in taking up employment and regaining control11[7] is restricted to part time (Daly and Leonard, 2002: 77). In a hierarchy of need and desires work is only considered realistic if it is located in accessible places with flexible hours that allow pick up. It is only after these are met that other criteria, how much it pays and work satisfaction, can be considered. While financial disincentives were an obstacle to employment the most fundamental obstacle was the likely impact on the children of their working and the sense that bringing up children alone means extra responsibilities (Russell and Corcoran, 2001: 36). Those parenting alone identity a greater need to be present in a supervisory and emotionally supportive role for older children (Horgan, 2005). The importance of local social and kin networks is also stressed by those parenting alone, 66% live in the family home (albeit in often over crowded conditions)12[8], 13% in private rented accommodation on rent supplement and the remainder in social housing. One parent family households also comprise a significant number of those on social housing waiting lists and often find themselves refusing housing offers to maintain living near social and kin networks.

The issue of housing location thus needs to be given more centrality in social policy. Likewise housing presents a significant barrier in the form of the disincentive caused by the loss of supplementary rent allowance. Horgan (2005: 21) highlights how inflexibility of public transport makes getting and keeping work next to impossible. The National Anti Poverty Strategy highlights how poverty is multidimensional and one of the clearest factors any activation strategy needs to take into account is the cumulative impact of income poverty, housing and environmental factors and parenting stresses on a persons health – 'we must understand how poverty dominates the lives of these women making them more vulnerable' (Baker and Tippin, 2004). Immediate life is often preoccupied with high poverty levels and the direct experience of isolation and tension of living in deprived areas (Daly and Leonard, 2002). The General Health Questionnaire records how women are more likely to experience mental ill health and psychological distress than men (Whelan, 1994). The stress associated with managing the monetary impact of poverty clearly impacts most on the household manager in this case either the one parent or the 'qualified adult'. Like Arrowsmith (2004) found in the UK, Daly and Leonard (2002: 59) recorded significant mental health issues 'feelings of depression and apathy' and noted how the cumulative nature of health problems was striking with links between low income, mental health, depression and other

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11 Conversely having a job contrasts strongly with being not being in control but with being subject to the controls exercised by the DSFA and other government services.

12 Those parenting alone comprise 13,000 rent supplements recipients and receive on average 40% above the national rent supplement.

types of illness. Horgan (2005: 17) also notes that in a study of similar groups in Northern Ireland 'although we knew there would be high levels of disability and ill health we were shocked at how much we found.' Likewise in socio-economically disadvantaged areas with higher proportionate numbers of one-parent families there is an increased incidence of stress and use anti-depressants (NAHB, 2003).

2.5 Education and training experiences of those parenting alone

NAPS (Government of Ireland, 2003) stresses employment as a route out of poverty. However for many, education is the route to sustainable employment. There is no up to date educational profile of this target group. Labour force survey data from 1997 highlighted that 47% of those parenting alone have either no formal education or only primary level education, 25% had only lower secondary, 18% had sat the leaving certificate and 10% had some form of thirds level education. 58% of young parents (15-24 years old) have not passed beyond junior certificate level. This rises to 64% for those in the 25 – 44 age group. Mothers parenting alone, 23% of whom had no qualifications, compare unfavourably to married mothers only 9% of whom had no qualifications (NESF 2001). ESRI (2005) found unmarried and separated parents have considerably lower levels of education levels than the average for all mothers.

This is consistent with the educational profile of the long term unemployed. The UK Work Based Learning for Adults Review highlighted that of participating parents 42% had never used a Personal Computer, 32% had no qualifications, 19% self reported literacy problems. Ralaheen (2006) found of 64 parents in one parent families participating in FÁS programme 27% had no formal education (primary school only), 53% had only completed up to junior certificate level and 20% up to leaving cert level. They found a keen interest in education with over a quarter pursuing further education (60% of those who had left school indicating that they would consider completing their education). Profiling exercise of those using LESN services in Ballymun and Ballyfermot found very significant levels of intervention was required among the 57% not considered employment ready. 45% had no educational qualifications, 26% had literacy difficulties and 35% had never participated in training (NESF, 2006). This scale of educational disadvantage suggests that an 'education first' rather than 'work first' activation strategy is required.

While a significant number of those parenting alone participate in VTOS education programmes and avail of the Back to Education Allowance not as many avail of educations options as need indicates. Reasons for this are various but seem dominated by childcare (Government of Ireland, 2000: 93) and structural supply issues in the education sector (Aontas, 2004). Key issues are the annual structure of Irish education programmes, which means Back to Education programme such as VTOS only have one annual intake and the fact that few realistic part time education options are available (One Family, 2006). There is perhaps a need to develop a modular leaving certificate option along the US Graduate Equivalency Diploma. Richardson (2000) notes that the majority of teen parents from one-parent families left school prior to pregnancy with very low levels of educational attainment but that the majority nonetheless wished to return to education. They planned to return to school once their own children were in school and saw this return to education as a central goal of their lives. They cited access to childcare and need to travel outside their own area as obstacles, local family are central to childcare hence local educational services are also essential. Attitudes of teachers and schools and a supportive environment in the institution are also considered crucial.

OPEN (2006) questions whether FÁS deliver training in a way that is accessible to those parenting alone families. Ralaheen (2006) discuss the tensions and tradeoffs between delivering the needs for industry standard training and making opening hours and venues accessible to those parenting alone. Table 3.1 (NESF, 2001) shows the low level participation of in FÁS training programmes and the high levels in Community Employment and other FÁS work programmes relative to education and training options. Ralaheen (2006) shows in 2005 FÁS placements of those parenting alone were heavily dominated by Community Employment (84%), Jobs Initiative (6%), and Social Economy (6%). Only 4% is accounted for by training and this is largely in local training initiatives or community training centres rather than specific skills training. Orientation to work experience is in part motivated by monetary reward (NESF, 2001; FÁS, 2006) but is also a function of lack of variety of training, accessible venues, transport and opening hours (Duggan and Loftus, 2006: 24). The National Reform Programme (2006) signals an intention to review present rules, which enable CE participants to keep their OPFP payment. This follows FÁS (2006) arguments that conditions accruing to OPFP participants taking CE should be examined to ensure there is a clear net gain from participating in regular employment. FÁS

(2006: 45) discusses expanding a tailored activation approach to OPFP recipients, argues FÁS should provide a range of suitable services on case load basis but has little expectation of high participation in training programmes and progression to employment for those parenting alone with young children until barriers such as work disincentives and lack of childcare are removed. FÁS's Expanding the Workforce (ETW) attracts low rates of participation of those parenting alone. FÁS are currently conducted a review as to why this is so.

2.6 Employment and those parenting alone

Labour market trends of those parenting alone vary across time and between different routes to parenting alone. In 1988 for example 37% of separated women were working as compared to 23% married women and 51% single and 7% widowed. At a given age, level of education and number and equivalent age of children of those parenting alone (with the exception of widows) are more likely to work than married women. Ralaheen (2006: 9) shows that by 2005 employment rates of those parenting alone were on a par with equivalent married mothers but that when a lone mother has very young children (under five) or older children (aged 15 plus) that their labour market participation is less than that of married mothers. This is consistent with the fact that over 34% of one parent households do not need OPFP. Of the 80,103 who do need OPFP in 2004, over 60% were in some form of employment (even if this employment as often low paid and part time).

There is a striking lack of information about what kind of jobs those parenting alone are accessing but UK and Northern Ireland reviews highlight sex segregated and badly rewarded labour markets (Duncan and Edwards, 1997: 271; Horgan, 2005: 24-26) with low pay, poor working condition, long unsocial hours, use of agencies and contracting out. While up to 60% of OPFP recipients and a significant number of qualified adults are working many of them are on very low paid and in part time work (Bryne and Leonard, 1997: 62). In 2004 38% of FIS claimants were those parenting alone and they made up almost 70% of the lowest wage bands claiming FIS. Geographical clustering and lack of mobility means of one parent family employment options are restricted to disadvantaged areas (Duggan and Loftus, 2006). Mothers generally trade off flexibility against low pay (Russell and Corcoran, 2001: 4) and social welfare dependant mothers may have disincentives to earn beyond earnings disregard or secondary benefit thresholds. Russell et al., (2001) tracked employment types that women returnees accessed over the years 1995 to 1999 and show 58% in low paid personal services, 14 % in manufacturing, 10% in clerical, 9% in technical/professional and 8% self employed (many in childcare). Previously employed women experienced a significant departure from previous employment due to the need for local flexible work. On average 71% re-enter through part time work options (compared to the national female average of 30.6% part time over same period (Russell and Corcoran, 2001: 113). While 22% worked less than 15 hours per week the average worked was 24 hours per week with the average hourly wage for women returnees significantly lower than female average. Half felt under utilised relative to skills and under employed in terms of skills levels and ranked satisfaction with hours and distance for commute significantly higher than satisfaction with earnings, job security, type of work and working conditions. Convenience of hours and location takes precedence over intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for working in rewarding and suitable employment.

Various countries have sought to stimulate realistic part time work opportunities13[9]. Few heads of one-parent families are placed into part time employment by FÁS employment services. Aside from CE there is little part time work available in FÁS's Jobs Ireland employment data. In 2002 FÁS placed 1,918 of those parenting alone in full time employment, only four in part time employment Ralaheen (2006: 20). The trend towards more flexible working practices is mixed. While public sector employment is characterised by increased use of flexi-time, job share and term time outside of large financial institutions there is less evidence of private sector firms introducing family friendly work policy yet it is here that such women will expect to find employment. Evidence is mixed about trends towards flexible work in the service sector14[10] but the trend seems to be towards employers requiring greater flexibility of employees.

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13 The Netherlands *The Working Hours Adjustment Act 2000* gives the right to reduce or increase hours irrespective of their reasons for wishing to do so.

14 Some firms allowing complete flexibility and for workers to fill in own time schedules (related in interview with FÁS) and others requiring workers to be available for all possible shifts but only offering a guaranteed minimum hours work (related interview with NESF).

2.7 Barriers to employment, unemployment traps, secondary benefits and childcare.

Adult poverty, child poverty and child well being will only be addressed if a mothers and family's financial situation improves as a result of going back to work. Income disregards, rules determining retention of secondary benefits, work supports such as Family Income Support and issues relating to the structure of child income support all influence possible return to employment (EAPN, 2005; OPEN, 2005). Some employment and poverty traps are caused by the loss of secondary benefits including rent allowances and medical cards (EAPN, 2004; OPEN, 2005; NESF, 2000; 2006). Rent supplement can only be retained for those on Back to Work Programmes and Community Employment programmes. However even for those there is a gross household earning limit of €317 (income from BTWA and FIS and monies paid in PRSI and reasonable travelling expenses is disregarded). This €317 limit has been frozen at a 1994 base even though the average industrial wage has increased by 75% in the same period and average rents have increased 40% in the same period (FÁS, 2006: 46). An alternative method of calculating the impact of earnings on rent supplement, the standards based assessment (SBA) guarantees those paying rent supplement a €60 return on part time employment, after which rent supplement is withdrawn Euro for Euro. FÁS (2006: 47) recommend a more gradual loss of rent supplement under this SBA scheme and Budget 2007 introduced a 50% withdrawal up to €200. While this may be a temporary short-term improvement there is longer term potential with the transfer of those in long-term private rental and depending on rent supplement to the new Local Authority managed Rental Accommodation Scheme (Jordan and Loftus, 2007). This operates on a differential rent basis, which claws back between 10-20% of earned income in rent, and produces more positive better work incentives. In anticipation of RAS being rolled out nationwide Budget 2007 allowed those eligible for RAS and waiting inclusion in the scheme to work full time under rent supplement. OPEN (2006) have lobbied that those waiting to transfer should be moved to a differential rent scheme while formally awaiting inclusion in the full RAS programme.

A number of changes made in Budget 2007 have eased but not eliminated some poverty traps. The move to increase the income disregards for OPFP by €25 to €400 per week is consistent with DSFA (2006) proposals and eases the transition from welfare to full time work. Continual increases in Family Income Supplement thresholds will help low income families. Still outstanding is the need to address the issue of cost of health care for low-income families (NESF, 2000), this could be addressed by introducing universal health care for children (consistent with the concept of universal core services in the developmental welfare state). The new National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006-2010 and a new National Childcare Training Strategy has a target of 17,000 additional childcare training places to be provided by 2010. However, it is not only availability but also cost of childcare that prohibits many mothers working full time. Failure to address the need for childcare affordability supports means there remains a significant obstacle to work (Kilkey and Bradshaw, 2001), which can be only overcome by subsidised childcare (NWCI, 2005). Ralaheen (2006) discussed the issue of early school opening and later school closing to facilitate pre and post school childcare for school aged children.

2.8 Conclusion: Towards a work obligation model for those parenting alone in Ireland

This DSFA (2006) proposal for work activation of one parent families involves a fundamental restructuring of both One Parent Family Payment and Qualified Adult Allowances into a household means tested 'Parental Allowance' (PA) for those who are primarily caring for children up to age seven. There will be no cohabiting rule and both one parent and two parent households can apply for the means tested PA. When the youngest child is aged between five and seven the PA is conditional on the parent or primary carer engaging with a DSFA based job facilitator about future education, training and employment options. When the youngest child is eight the PA ceases and the primary carer moves to a Jobs Seekers Allowance (JSA)15[11]. The new PA will be set at the current OPFP rate (the same rate as JSA) however the income disregard available under PA will be significantly different to income disregards under JSA (OPEN, 2006). Once on JSA the parent is subject to a work test and systematic engagement under the National Employment Action Plan and is obliged to take up an education, training, and employment option of 19.5 hours per week or more. While the report discusses the supports needed to enable significant employment of this target group there is no tangible quantification of or a budgetary commitment to provide such supports. Rather this is the subject of an ongoing implementation and planning period with other service providers (Murphy, 2007)

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15 The 2006 Social Welfare Act renamed unemployment payments as 'Job Seeker' payments.

Aiming to increase labour market participation of those parenting alone, the key motivating factor behind 2006 DSFA proposals, is a significant departure from traditional policy of supporting full time mothering. It was however flagged in the 1999 Working Group examining the treatment of married, cohabiting and one-parent families under the Tax and Social Codes and discussed again in DSFCA (2000) and NESF (2001). Such a move is consistent with the EU Employment Strategy, which is implemented in Ireland through the 1998 National Employment Action Plan (NEAP) case management strategy administered by FÁS. NEAP is a work focused activation strategy rather than a social inclusion focused strategy. A successful outcome is viewed as reduction in the live register, there is little focus on education and training and Indecon (2006) highlight that most people exit to a relatively low paid job. Towards 2016 agrees to extend NEAP process to those parenting alone and to do this is in 'a sensitive and positive manner'. It is questionable however whether the present form of NEAP can meet the needs of the target groups. NESF (2006) argue for significant reform of FÁS case management strategy including more integrated local delivery and post employment support.

Recent labour markets trends and lobbying from women's groups (Murphy, 2003; OPEN, 2005) suggests Irish mothers wish to work and are actively seeking the supports to do so. The reality is of course that mothers are neither exclusively at home or work but are involved in a continuum of both (Murphy, 2003). Groups question the wisdom of subjecting those parenting alone to a compulsory work test, the choice of age of the child at which to initiate activation, the loss of the social rights to care for children and possible negative impact on child development. At a more practical level many groups challenged whether well-integrated quality practical supports (including affordable and accessible childcare, issues associated with retention of secondary medical and housing supports, availability of relevant education and training and decent employment opportunities) would be available (OPEN, 2006; NWCI, 2006; One Family, 2006).

There are significant variations in the institutional provision of activation processes (Millar, 1999) but successful delivery of activation requires local differentiation of welfare to work strategies. This requires capable local institutions and networks to work to a common agenda (Finn, 2000: 45-53) and often involves merging the institutional relationship between employment services and income supports. A social inclusion rather than work first approach means focusing the case work process and the role of the mediator in as wide a role as possible and in the best position to provide an integrated rather than solely labour market focused service. NESF (2006) outline as a national strategic employment framework linked to a national reform programme. They advocate an Interdepartmental National Framework, which would encourage a more personalised service from a Local Partnership Network to provide full menu of supports funded through service delivery agreements. They identify DSFA, FÁS, VEC, CDBs, and Area Based Companies who they argue should have an explicit mandate, should have co-operation built into staffs job description and should be allowed maximum flexibility. A defining feature of Irish policy making is the considerable gap between policy and implementation. The scale of implementation challenges requires a quantum leap and considerable innovation and institutional change and it is impossible at this stage to determine how this will be implemented. What is required in this first instance is societal consensus that a social inclusion rather than work first approach is the preferred direction.

Chapter Three
Results of the One Parent
Family Payment Questionnaire

3.1 Introduction

Detailed statistical information on people in the Republic of Ireland who receive the One Parent Family Payment (henceforth OPFP) remains scarce. This survey aims to contribute to a better understanding of the demographic characteristics, family circumstances, support networks and perceived and actual living standards of one parent families in Galway City and County. A wide range of quality of life indicators will be explored, including access to public and private transport, standard of housing and health- and disability-related issues. Most importantly, however, this survey will focus on a range of (perceived) opportunities and barriers to further education and employment, as reported by the survey respondents.

The OPFQ targeted men and women in Galway City and County who were in receipt of the OPFP at the time of the study (February 2007). Overall 3,144 parents who parent alone were written to (nMALE =67). This chapter will summarise the answers of 676 participants who completed and returned the OPFQ.16 Participation was entirely voluntary at every stage of the research process and all returned questionnaires were immediately separated from any ID-related information. To prevent identification and ensure anonymity throughout, only aggregate data was used for the analyses presented in this chapter. Moreover, any information that could potentially be used to link individuals to their answers (e.g. scores for small subgroups based on nationality, age, number of children, or location) has been re-grouped (e.g. combination of 2 or more subgroups to increase number).

The remainder of this chapter will be divided into four principal sections. Firstly, key demographic and quality of life indicators that reflect the profile and general living conditions of OPFP recipients in Galway City and County. Then we focus on issues related to education, training and (un)paid work and their relevance to participants at the time of the study. Subsequently, we will explore the living conditions and views of OPFP recipients who were in paid employment at the time of the survey (February/March 2007). Finally, we will provide a more detailed account of response patterns among those who were in training and/or education at the time of the survey.

3.2 Demographic and geographical information

Part A of the OPFQ was intended to generate data regarding key demographic variables such as gender, age, marital status, nationality, or place of residence. In addition part A covered socio-economic variables such as professional qualifications, educational attainment and home ownership rates as well as quality of life indicators, including health and access to (public) transport. Levels of support in relation to parenting were also assessed. The analysis of Part A data delivered information on the overall demographic composition of the sample and helped identify what *types* of one parent family avail of the OPFP in Galway City and County. Part A also provided information which was subsequently used to identify demographic and quality of life factors that influence education, training and employment choices of OPFP recipients, including their (perceived) access to education and employment.

Basic Demographic Information

The male-female ratio within the OPFQ sample deviated greatly from that of the general population in Ireland (though not necessarily from the gender distribution amongst those parenting alone – out of the 3,144 OPFP recipients that were sent the OPFQ only 67 were fathers parenting alone): the majority of respondents (98.5%) in the sample were female (n=666), compared to only 10 male respondents (1.5%) (see Chart 3.1 below, left). This suggests that women continue to be largely responsible for childcare, with or without a partner or spouse, and that they are thus more likely to encounter economic and social difficulties associated with one parent family life. Overall, the small number of male respondents limited the scope for direct gender-related comparisons of OPFQ data.

A more detailed analysis of the age profile of the 676 respondents revealed interesting patterns that did not match widely held perceptions of one parent families as belonging to younger age groups. Only a small percentage (4.2%) of all respondents were 20 years and younger while the majority of respondents (38.8% and 33.3%) placed themselves in the 21–30 and 31–40 age group

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16 This is equivalent to a response rate of 22%.

respectively. One fifth of the sample (20.2%) were between 41 and 50 years old while a small number (3.6%) classified themselves as over 50 (see Chart 3.1 below, right). An analysis of respondents' marital status shows a high concentration of singles in the sample (69%, n_{female} = 462, n_{male} = 3). Less than one fifth (18.7%) stated that they are married and separated from their spouse. Less than 10% of respondents are divorced while a very small proportion (2.8%) reported to be widowed, (0.9%), cohabiting (0.7%) or other (1.2%) (see Chart 3.2 below).

Chart 3.1: Respondents' Gender and Age Group
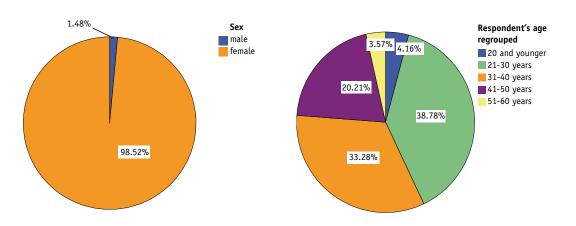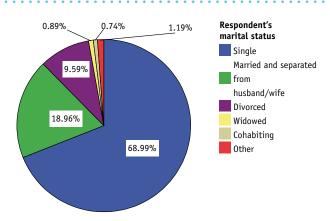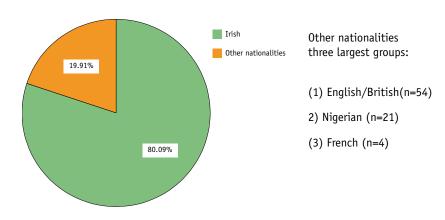
Chart 3.2: Respondents' Marital Status

	Female	*Male*
Single	**462** (69.6%)	**3** (30.0%)
Married and Separated	**124** (18.7%)	**2** (20.0%)
Divorced	**62** (9.3%)	**2** (20.0%)
Widowed	**5** (0.8%)	**1** (10.0%)
Cohabiting	**4** (0.6%)	**1** (10.0%)
Other	**7** (1.1%)	**1** (10.0%)

An assessment of respondents' nationality revealed that the majority (80%) classified themselves as Irish, compared to 20% of respondents who stated that they are non-Irish nationals. The three largest groups of non-Irish respondents were OPFP recipients who categorised themselves as English/British (nEnglish/British = 54), respondents from Nigeria (nNigerian = 21) and a smaller group from France (nFrench = 4). It is important to note that question A9 – what is your nationality – was designed as an open-

ended question. Respondents were thus able to give the full details of their nationality, including dual citizenship/more than one nationality or none at all. Overall, we recorded 35 different nationalities, including 3 types of dual citizenship/nationality (Irish-English, Irish-American and Irish-Canadian).

Chart 3.3: Respondents' Nationality

Irish
Other nationalities

Other nationalities
three largest groups:

(1) English/British(n=54)

2) Nigerian (n=21)

(3) French (n=4)

Education

A person's educational attainments greatly influence their opportunities for employment and further education. Education is also age-related both in terms of so-called 'cohort effects' that arise from historical transformations and changes in education policy as well as longitudinal effects, that is, the extent to which people's life-course is affected by parenting alone. The OPFQ asked respondents to state their highest level of education (Item A6).

Overall, the data showed some significant age-related effects on the highest level of education achieved by respondents. The younger cohorts of OPFP recipients (20 and younger, 21–30 and 31–40) are more likely to have started/completed third level education than older respondents (41–50 and 51–60 category). This may be attributable to cohort effects: the younger the respondents the more likely they are to have (had) access to third level education because of changes in policy (e.g. free fees to encourage greater participation). On the other hand, members of the youngest age group – 20 and younger – appear to have put back their education (at least for the foreseeable future), with a significant number reporting primary education and Junior or Inter-cert only. However, there is a possibility that some will return to third level education, in particular given the number of respondents in the two youngest age groups – 20 and younger and 21–30 – who started third level education prior to their transition to parenthood and who might complete their degrees at a later stage.

Table 3.1: Highest Level of Education by Age (regrouped)

% (N)	20 and younger	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	TOTAL
No schooling	0	0	0	0	4.3 (1)	0.2 (1)
Primary education only	11.1 (3)	3.1 (8)	6.8 (15)	4.5 (6)	8.7 (2)	5.1 (34)
Junior or Inter-cert	37 (10)	12.8 (33)	15.4 (34)	26.9 (36)	34.8 (8)	18.3 (121)
Leaving Cert	22.2 (6)	27.2 (70)	23.1 (51)	21.6 (29)	17.4 (4)	24.2 (160)
Vocational training	7.4 (2)	15.6 (40)	11.3 (25)	11.2 (15)	17.4 (4)	13 (86)
Some Third level education	22.2 (6)	21.4 (55)	19 (42)	18.7 (25)	17.4 (4)	19.9 (132)
Complete Third level education	0	19.8 (51)	24.4 (54)	17.2 (23)	0	19.3 (128)
TOTAL	100 (27)	100 (257)	100 (221)	100 (134)	100 (23)	100 (662)

$X^2 = 77.45$, p = .000 [17]

Homeownership Statistics

Homeownership rates and financial obligations in relation to owning or renting a home are important factors that determine the socio-economic situation of a household. The OPFQ results reveal very low levels of homeownership (22.2%), with only 8% owning outright and 14.2% owning with mortgage. In contrast, more than 67% of respondents stated that they rent either from private landlords (41.9%) or through their Local Authority (25.8%). This compares to a home ownership rate of 75% nationally (including 3% under Local Authority schemes) and 16% who rent either privately or from Local Authorities (CSO, 2003). An analysis of the specifications provided by respondents in the category 'other' shows that the majority of them either rely on parental support (e.g. parents/mother/father own the apartment/house both with and without mortgage) or avail of alternative rental organisations and agencies (e.g. various housing co-ops, CLUID).

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17 The Pearson's CHI square (X^2) test compares the frequencies if the null hypothesis (H_0) was true (= expected values) with the actual frequencies (= observed values) to show differences between two or more groups. X^2 thus tests the difference between a *theoretical* distribution (e.g. values for each age group that reflect the null hypothesis (H_0) that there is no difference in levels of education between them) and an *actual* distribution (observable levels of education within each age group). A relatively high CHI-square value and a significance level $p \leq 0.05$ suggest a risk of 5% or less of falsely accepting the alternative hypothesis (H_1), that is, that there is a significant difference in the level of education attained by members of different age groups.

Table 3.2: Homeownership Rates by Nationality

%	Irish	Non-Irish	TOTAL
Own outright	9.2	3.1	8.0
Own with mortgage	16.0	6.9	14.2
Rent privately	35.7	66.9	41.9
Rent from Local Authority	28.2	16.2	25.8
Other	10.9	6.9	10.1

$X^2= 42.7$, p = .000

A key influence on homeownership rates is nationality (see Table 3.2 above). Most importantly, non-Irish respondents seem to be more reliant on the private rental sector compared to their Irish counterparts who are more likely to either own their own home (with or without mortgage) or rent from their Local Authority. As regards the quality of housing, more than two thirds of respondents stated that they live in a detached (33%) or semi-detached (36%) home. Interestingly, 12.5% of all respondents stated that they live in an apartment or flat, which is significantly above the national average of 5.2% in 2003 (CSO, 2003). As regards apartment living, non-Irish respondents scored higher (17.6%) than their Irish counterparts (11.2%), though overall there was no significant relationship between nationality and type of housing ($X2= 8.695$, p = .122).

Health and Disability

Overall, a large majority of respondents rated their health status as excellent (17%), very good (37.4%) or good (34.8) (Item A10). Only 10.7% stated that they perceive their health to be fair (8.6%) or poor (2.1%). Again, we can observe significant age effects here ($X^2= 60.58$, p = .000), with the highest concentration of respondents with 'fair' or 'poor' health being 41 or older (age categories 4 and 5). As a result, older respondents (cat. 4 and 5) were also less likely to rate their health as excellent or very good, though respondents who are 41 years and older scored 2nd highest in the 'good health' category (Table 3.3 below).

Table 3.3: Health Status (re-grouped) by Age
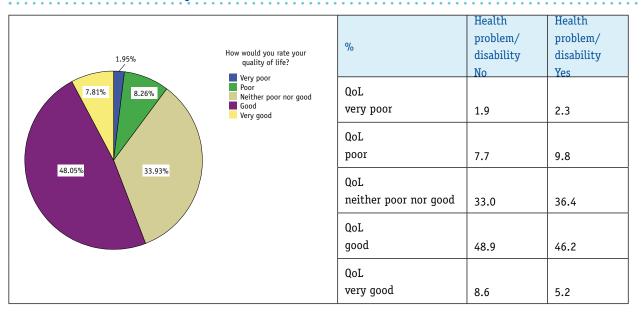
% (N)	20 and younger	21–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	TOTAL
High*	71.4	55.9	59.2	47.4	13	54.4
Medium*	28.6	37.9	28.0	40.7	39.1	34.8
Low*	0	6.3	12.8	11.9	47.8	10.8
TOTAL	100 (28)	100 (256)	100 (218)	100 (135)	100 (23)	100 (660)

*High: 'excellent' and 'very good'; Medium: 'good'; Low: 'fair' and 'poor'; $X^2= 54.62$, p = .000

In relation to self-reported illnesses and disabilities, 20.5% of the sample stated that they suffer from a long-term illness, health problem or disability. The majority of these respondents also report a medium (44%; category 'good') or low (36.6%; categories 'fair' and 'poor') health status. This clearly shows that reported health status and disability/health problem are linked ($X2= 148.95$, p = .000).

As regards self-reported quality of life (QoL), the majority of respondents appeared to be satisfied – 48.3% rated their QoL as 'good' and 8% said their QoL is 'very good'. Only 10.1% rated their QoL as 'poor' (8.1%) and 'very poor' (2%) respectively while a further 33.6% classified their QoL as 'neither poor nor good'. Interestingly, people's quality of life was not contingent upon them reporting a long-term health problem or disability (X2= 2.66, p = .616). However, respondents' reported health status (high, medium, low) was related to their QoL ratings (X2= 42.85, p = .000). This suggests that respondents' perceptions of their overall health are more important than their actual health status.

Table 3.4: Health and Quality of Life

%	Health problem/ disability No	Health problem/ disability Yes
QoL very poor	1.9	2.3
QoL poor	7.7	9.8
QoL neither poor nor good	33.0	36.4
QoL good	48.9	46.2
QoL very good	8.6	5.2

Of those who reported a long-term health problem or disability, 23% stated that their condition is temporary, compared to 76.9% who reported a permanent disability or long-term illness. Again, there was no significant different in QoL between respondents with a temporary health problem and those who reported a permanent disability or illness, confirming the above suggestion that perceived health issues are more relevant to people's view of their quality of life than their actual health problems (X2= 4.58, p = .332).

Access and Geographical Distribution

A person's place of residence plays a significant role in relation to access and availability of services, in particular in the context of rural versus urban. This is also reflected in the interview data presented elsewhere in this report which identifies geographical location and access to important services as a major influence on respondents' decision to return to work/education/training (e.g. comments on the availability of courses in Galway City but not outside). OPFQ respondents were split almost evenly into urban and rural dwellers: 52.8% of all respondents stated that they live in Galway City while 47.2% were based in County Galway at the time of the survey.18

In relation to respondents' place of residence, it was possible to identify some key areas both within and outside Galway City. 556 respondents provided more detailed information on their place of residence and these details were subsequently re-grouped by area. In Galway City we can observe a relatively high concentration of respondents in areas with a significant amount of private

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18 Please note that the rural-urban distinction used in this part of the report has been based on administrative boundaries (i.e. County versus City) rather than population density. However, we would suggest that there is also some variation within the County in terms of levels of urbanity, with some of the County locations being 'more urban' than others partly because of their proximity to Galway City.

Table 3.5: Place of Residence

Area	Number of respondents
Galway City	**301**
• Ballybane/Ballybrit/Eastside (incl. Ashbrook, Castlepark, Riverside)	60
• City centre (incl. Bohermore, Claddagh, Westend)	15
• Doughiska	17
• Headford Road/Terryland-Tirellan/Menlo	33
• Knocknacarra/Cappagh Road	61
• Merlin (Park)/Roscam	5
• Mervue/Wellpark	7
• Newcastle/Dangan/Bushy Park	15
• Oranmore	17
• Rahoon	13
• Renmore	4
• Salthill	11
• Westside/Shantalla/Highfield Park	43
County Galway	**255**
• An Cheathru Rua	3
• Aran Islands	3
• Athenry (incl. Monivea)	14
• Ballinasloe (incl. Ahascragh, Creggs, Ballygar)	28
• Ballymoe/Williamstown	5
• Barna	8
• Claregalway (incl. Cashla)	6
• Clarinbridge/Kilcolgan	6
• Clifden area (incl. Ballyconneely, Claddaghduff, Cleggan)	15
• Connemara (incl. Clonbur, Kylemore, Letterfrack, Lettermore, Renvyle, Tully)	36
• Craughwell	4
• Dunmore	4
• Eyrecourt/Killimor/Tynagh	5
• Glenamaddy	6
• Gort (incl. Ardrahan, Peterswell)	10
• Headford/Corrandulla	7
• Kinvara	4
• Loughrea (incl. Woodlawn)	22
• Mountbellew/Moylough/ Castleblakeney	5
• Moycullen	8
• Oughterard/Rosscahill	6
• Portumna (incl. Woodford)	6
• Spiddal/Inverin	10
• Tuam area (incl. Abbeyknockmoy, Caherlistrane, Corofin, Kilconly, Milltown, Turloughmore)	34

rental accommodation and comparatively lower rents (e.g. Eastside and Knocknacarra), compared to more expensive, high-demand rental areas (e.g. City Centre and Salthill). Moreover, areas such as Knocknacarra and Ballybane/Ballybrit/ Eastside also include major council and social and affordable housing schemes. A significant number of respondents in the County Galway area live in larger towns (e.g. Athenry, Ballinasloe, Loughrea, and Tuam). This said, a larger group (n=36) can also be found in the Connemara region.

Place of residence – urban versus rural – also greatly influences respondents' transport and mobility patterns. 94.7% of City dwellers stated that they have access to public transport, compared to only 58.7% in rural locations outside the City. Similarly, City dwellers were much more likely to live near a bus stop (see Table 3.6 below).

Table 3.6: Time to Walk to Nearest Bus Stop by Place of Residence

%	City	County
Less than 5 minutes	74.3	22.5
Less than 10 minutes	17.9	18.4
10 minutes and more	7.8	59.0

X^2= 192.1, p = .000

These figures also explain differences in car ownership/access to a car – 66% of City dwellers stated that they have the use of a car, compared to 74.9% of those living in rural areas. Overall, rural dwellers are much more likely to depend on the use of a car to meet their mobility needs and this also impacts on overall levels of access to vital services (see below). As regard the relative permanency/temporariness of accommodation arrangements, a considerable number – almost 24% – of all respondents (n=161) reported that they had moved since becoming a one parent family. An initial assessment of the reasons why respondents moved house revealed a very complex picture. Respondent's answers included;

1) Parental support/moving in with/closer to parents/ (ex) partner,

2) Financial considerations,

3) Abuse by parents/partner, domestic violence, bad neighbours

4) Being offered a council house,

5) Job loss,

6) Breakdown of marriage/relationship,

7) Isolation,

8) Better quality of life (e.g. country living, better transport in the City, more appropriate accommodation),

9) To avail of educational opportunities and

10) The desire to provide a better/safe environment/ home for their child(ren) (e.g. better schools and transport links, less crime).

Respondents' homeownership status seems to significantly affect the likelihood of respondents changing accommodation (X2 = 13.978, p = .007). 30.8% of respondents in private rented accommodation and 20.8% of those in rented council accommodation reported that they had moved since becoming a one parent family. This compares to 13.7% among those who own outright and 16.7% of respondents who own with a mortgage. 21.2% of respondents in the category 'other' (e.g. accommodation owned by
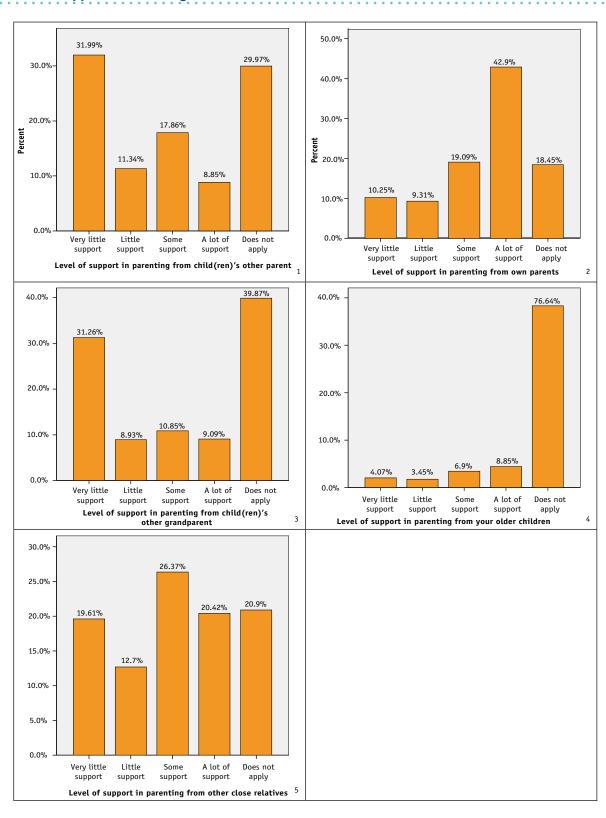
parents/ex-partner/other relative, rented from co-op/voluntary housing organisation/CLUID, in receipt of rent allowance/social welfare/HSE supplement) stated that they had moved since becoming a one parent family. Overall, one parent families in rented accommodation (private and local authority) and those who rely on their parents, ex-partner or other relatives for accommodation were more likely to have moved since becoming a one parent family. This suggests that people's decision to move depends on a combination of economic (e.g. cost of renting, insecurity of rental agreements), cultural (e.g. emphasis on homeownership, perceived marginality of rental sector) and social factors (e.g. proximity to and [lack of] support from family). Some of these findings (e.g. perceived marginality of renting, strong desire to own a home/have a permanent place to live in) are also confirmed by the qualitative interview data presented elsewhere in this report.
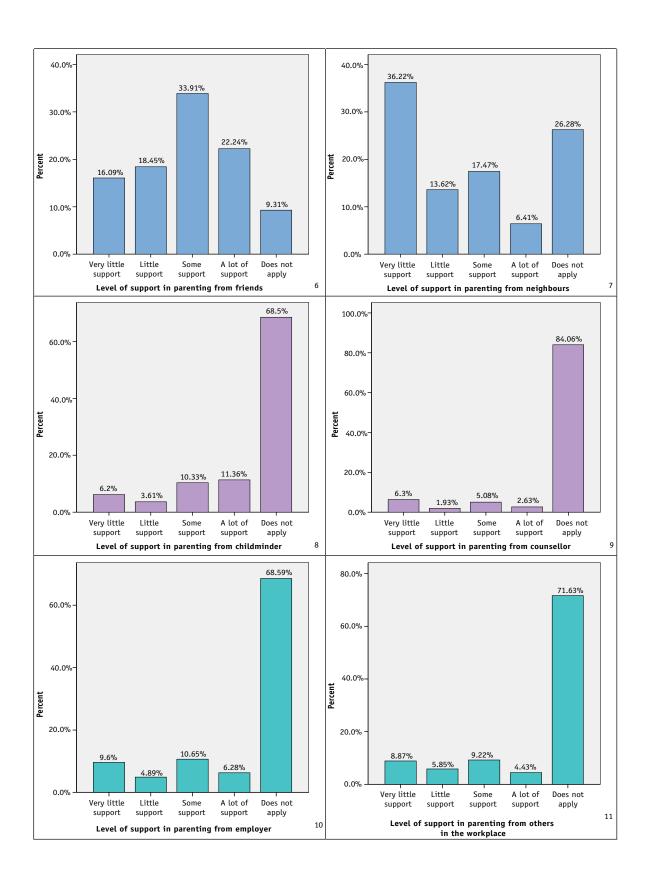
Social Support Networks

Social contacts (both within and outside the family) can have a significant influence on the (perceived) level of support regarding parenting. One of the key questions in Section A of the OPFQ asked respondents to rate the level of support in parenting they feel they are getting from others. Answer categories ranged from 'very little support' to 'a lot of support' and also included a 'does not apply' option. Here, it is useful to distinguish between four key sources of parenting support:

1) Family (charts No. 1–5, e.g. parents, (ex) partner, older children, child(ren)'s other grandparents, close relatives);

2) Wider social circles (charts 6 and 7, e.g. friends and neighbours);

3) Professionals (charts 8 and 9, e.g. childminder, counsellor) and

4) Work-related contacts (charts 10 and 11, e.g. employer/boss and others in work).

Table 3.7: Support in Parenting

Chart 1 — Level of support in parenting from child(ren)'s other parent
- Very little support: 31.99%
- Little support: 11.34%
- Some support: 17.86%
- A lot of support: 8.85%
- Does not apply: 29.97%

Chart 2 — Level of support in parenting from own parents
- Very little support: 10.25%
- Little support: 9.31%
- Some support: 19.09%
- A lot of support: 42.9%
- Does not apply: 18.45%

Chart 3 — Level of support in parenting from child(ren)'s other grandparent
- Very little support: 31.26%
- Little support: 8.93%
- Some support: 10.85%
- A lot of support: 9.09%
- Does not apply: 39.87%

Chart 4 — Level of support in parenting from your older children
- Very little support: 4.07%
- Little support: 3.45%
- Some support: 6.9%
- A lot of support: 8.85%
- Does not apply: 76.64%

Chart 5 — Level of support in parenting from other close relatives
- Very little support: 19.61%
- Little support: 12.7%
- Some support: 26.37%
- A lot of support: 20.42%
- Does not apply: 20.9%

Level of support in parenting from friends — 6

- Very little support: 16.09%
- Little support: 18.45%
- Some support: 33.91%
- A lot of support: 22.24%
- Does not apply: 9.31%

Level of support in parenting from neighbours — 7

- Very little support: 36.22%
- Little support: 13.62%
- Some support: 17.47%
- A lot of support: 6.41%
- Does not apply: 26.28%

Level of support in parenting from childminder — 8

- Very little support: 6.2%
- Little support: 3.61%
- Some support: 10.33%
- A lot of support: 11.36%
- Does not apply: 68.5%

Level of support in parenting from counsellor — 9

- Very little support: 6.3%
- Little support: 1.93%
- Some support: 5.08%
- A lot of support: 2.63%
- Does not apply: 84.06%

Level of support in parenting from employer — 10

- Very little support: 9.6%
- Little support: 4.89%
- Some support: 10.65%
- A lot of support: 6.28%
- Does not apply: 68.59%

Level of support in parenting from others in the workplace — 11

- Very little support: 8.87%
- Little support: 5.85%
- Some support: 9.22%
- A lot of support: 4.43%
- Does not apply: 71.63%

The above charts show that family members in general, and parents in particular (scoring highest overall in the 'a lot of support' category with 43%), provide vital support in parenting (this is also confirmed by the qualitative interview data). This contrasts with the child(ren)'s other parent – 32% of respondents stated that they get little support from their former partner while almost 30% claimed that this option does not apply at all. Friends are often able to offer 'some' (34%) or 'a lot of support' (22%) while neighbours appear to play a minor role in supporting one parent families (17.5% in 'some support category; 6.4 in 'a lot of support' category). Childminders, counsellors, employers and colleagues play only a very small role in supporting the respondents in their parenting obligations, with 'does not apply' scores ranging from 69% for childminders and employers to 72% for colleagues and 84% for counsellors.

Overall, this shows that (extended) family ties continue to offer the most support for one parent families compared to sources of parental support outside the family. Most notably, many respondents do not seem to avail of childminding services outside the family. Qualitative interview data presented elsewhere in this report suggests that financial reasons, issues around trust and emotional support as well as the benefits of mutual encouragement within the family contribute to this pattern of parental support.

3.3 Education, Training and Work

Section B of the OPFQ focused on current activities – education, training and (un)paid work – and asked respondents to report on any steps taken to return to work or education/ training. Section B inquired into the nature of current activities (paid/ unpaid; education, training) as well as respondents' use of various services and schemes provided by community and voluntary organisations, local authorities, state agencies and the DSFA. The OPFQ also asked respondents to comment on their previous work experience, how many years they have been in receipt of the OPFP and what their priorities for the future are.

Current Activities

Table 3.8: Current Activities (multiple answers)

Which of the activities below are you currently involved in?	Responses		% of cases*
	N of answers	% of answers	
Looking after home/family	468	41.9%	70.8
Caring for sick/disabled child	18	1.6%	2.7
Caring for sick/disabled/elderly person	30	2.7%	4.5
In education	157	14.0%	23.8
On training scheme	43	3.8%	6.5
Doing voluntary/unpaid work	56	5.0%	8.5
Paid work	229	20.5%	34.6
Waiting to start job	64	5.7%	9.7
Participating in work experience as part of training	22	2.0%	3.3
Maternity leave	1	.1%	.2
Other	30	2.7%	4.5
TOTAL	1118	100%	169.1

*n=661, $n_{missing}$ = 15

Item B1 asked respondents to state which activities they are currently involved in (Table 3.8 above). Table 3.8 shows that the majority of respondents are currently looking after their home and family (71% of all cases or 42% of all responses, NB: multiple responses possible). 157 respondents (equalling 24% of all cases or 14% of all answers) stated that they are currently involved in education while 229 people (equalling 35% of all cases or 20.5% of all answers) are engaged in paid work (see Table 3.8 for further details). Item B1 did not explore the nature of paid work in more detail; however, qualitative interview material presented elsewhere in this report shows that those parenting alone often prefer a part-time job and/or flexible hours which allow them to reconcile paid work and childcare responsibilities. However, flexible and/or part-time work is not always available and this can prevent some parents from (re-)entering the labour force. Similarly, access to educational facilities (many of which are concentrated in Galway City) and the availability of part-time courses appear to influence the decisions of those parenting alone in relation to further education/ training.

Seeking Assistance: Agencies, Organisations and their Services

a) Use of Services

Item B2a explored the use of existing services aimed at people looking for training, education and employment schemes and opportunities.[19] 348 respondents ticked 'yes' in answer category 1 – registration with local employment service/FÁS – while 369 respondents stated that they know who to contact about starting education or training (category 6). In contrast, significantly fewer respondents had previously participated in other work/education/training schemes, such as Community Employment Schemes (n=137), FÁS apprenticeships and training courses (n=29 and n=162) and the Young Mothers in Education scheme (n=47).

Overall, 315 respondents stated that they have looked for work in the last 12 months (Item B2a – last option, nvalid=631). An analysis of subgroups – using the categories under Item B1 – showed that different groups are more or less active in their search for work (see Table 3.10 below, nyes =310, nvalid =618). At the upper end, 46 (or 74%) of the 62 respondents waiting to take up/start a job (B1 category 8) who answered (parts of) question B2a said that they had looked for paid employment in the last 12 months. At the lower end, 10 (or 40%) of the 25 respondents who care for a sick/elderly/disable person (B1 category 3) and who answered (parts of) B2a said that they had looked for work in the past year.

Table 3.9: Education, training and work (B2a)

Cat		Number of valid responses to each category (1-8)	Yes
1	Registered with local employment service/FÁS	655	348
2	Taken part in Community Employment Scheme	627	137
3	Taken part in FÁS apprenticeship	596	29
4	Completed FÁS training course	646	162
5	Contacted any training agency	634	212
6	Know who to contact re education/training	632	369
7	Contacted Young Mothers in Education project	638	47
8	Looked for work in last 12 months	631	315
	Valid N (listwise)	531	

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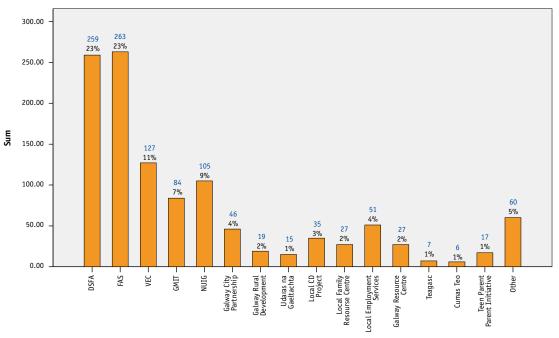
19 All B2a items (1-8) were treated as separate items here to avoid losing too many respondents through listwise exclusion (i.e. exclusion from further analysis on the basis of a missing value on *any* of the 8 items).

Table 3.10: Have you looked for work in the last 12 months by current activity

	Number of respondents in each category who have looked for work in the last 12 months ('yes' answers)	% in each category ('yes' answers)	Total number of valid responses by category
Looking after home/family	211	47.8	441
Caring for sick/disabled child	10	62.5	16
Caring for sick/disabled/elderly person	10	40.0	25
In education	76	49.7	153
On training scheme	25	61.0	41
Doing voluntary/unpaid work	27	51.9	52
Paid work	114	56.7	201
Waiting to start job	46	74.2	62
Participating in work experience as part of training	12	57.1	21
Maternity leave	0	0	1
Other	14	48.3	29
TOTAL	**310**		**618**

Item B3 looked at various local institutions and agency that respondents had approached when looking for education and training opportunities (see Chart 3.4).[20] The DSFA and FÁS featured prominently while other agencies and institutions were less frequently used by respondents for accessing education and training, perhaps with the exception of Galway VEC and NUIG which are in third and fourth place after the DSFA and FÁS.

Chart 3.4: Agencies and Institutional Contact – Education and Training
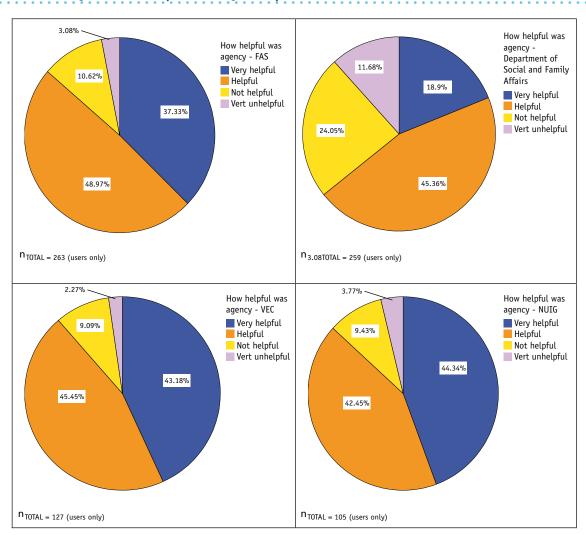
b) Quality of Services

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20 Here a system of listwise exclusion of cases was applied to ensure maximum comparability, i.e. only those respondents who answered all B3 questions were included.

As regards respondents' view of the quality of services (Item B4) offered through the four most frequently used institutions and agencies – DSFA, FÁS, VEC and NUIG – we can detect some distinct patterns: the overall majority of users expressed their satisfaction with the services offered (see Chart 3.5). FÁS, VEC and NUIG received very positive ratings, with less than 15% of users expressing dissatisfaction (answer categories 'not helpful' and very unhelpful'). The DSFA performed less positively, with more than one third of users rating it as 'not helpful' or 'very unhelpful'. However, it is important to note that variations in these ratings are likely to be influenced by a number of factors other than the actual quality of services offered (e.g. frequency of contact, reasons for contacting services).

Chart 3.5: Quality of Services (as rated by users)

Seeking employment: Barriers, Goals and Aspirations

In part B of the OPFQ respondents were also asked to answer some questions regarding potential barriers to (re-)entering paid employment (Items B2b; Items B6–19 for respondents who were not already in paid employment at the time of the survey). This said, Items B6-19 also offered respondents the opportunity to comment on their goals and aspirations for the next few years and to highlight issues which are important to them and which may or may not affect their ability to take up paid work. Item 5 inquired about the number of years respondents have been in receipt of the OPFP.
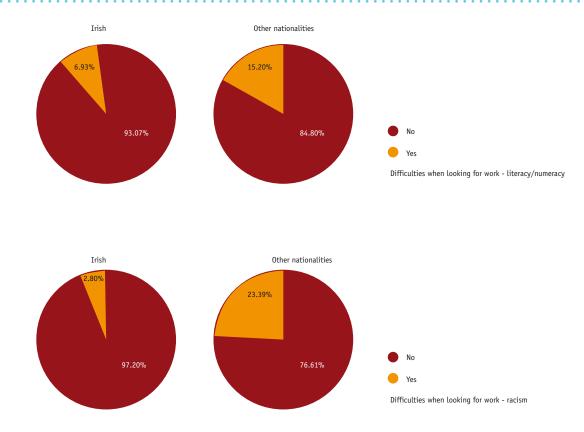
a) Literacy/Numeracy and Racial Discrimination

Table 3.11: Difficulties When Looking for Employment (all respondents)

N (%)	Yes	No
Difficulties when looking for work:Literacy/ numeracy problems	56 (8.7)	591 (91.3)
Difficulties when looking for work:Racism	45 (7.0)	596 (93.0)

Respondents were asked to comment on any literacy- or race-related difficulties when looking for employment (Table 3.11). Initial exploratory work to prepare the OPFQ revealed that a lack of (English) language skills and racial background may impact on some respondents' experiences of the job market and recruitment processes, in particular non-Irish participants. The OPFQ results suggest that nationality impacts significantly on whether or not respondents experience literacy- and/or race-related difficulties when looking for employment (Literacy/numeracy: $X2= 8.74$, $p = .003$; Racism: $X2= 65.63$, $p = .000$). Literacy/numeracy problems were mentioned by 6.9% of Irish respondents who answered this question (nIRISH = 505), compared to 15.2 of the non-Irish participants (nNON-IRISH = 125; nTOTAL = 630). Difficulties regarding racism were mentioned by 2.8% of Irish respondents who answered this question (nIRISH = 500), compared to 23.4 of the non-Irish respondents (nNON-IRISH = 124; nTOTAL = 624).
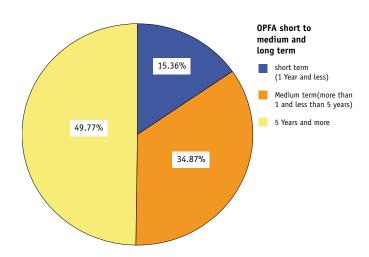
Chart 3.6: Literacy/numeracy and race-related problems by nationality

b) OPFP and Employment

Item B5 related to the number of years that the respondent has been in receipt of the OPFP. Here we can distinguish between short-, medium- and long-term recipients of the payment, using 1 and 5 years as the cut-off points (short-term: one year and less; medium-term: more than 1 but less than 5 years; long-term: 5 or more years). The average duration is 5.6 years, with a mode of 2 years and a median of 4 years.

Chart 3.7: Duration of OPFP in Years

It is important to note at this point that the duration of OPFP in years did not seem to influence respondents' search for work over the past 12 months (Item B2, option 8). There was no significant difference between the three groups (1= 1 year and less; 2= more than 1 but less than 5 years; 3= 5 years and more) regarding respondents' search for work (X2= 2.565, p = .277).

c) Other Barriers

Item B9 asked respondents to think about issues that might affect their ability to engage in paid work and to rate them according to their significance (big/small/no issue). Table 13 contains a list of potential barriers and the mean scores (3-point-rating scale, 1=big issue, 2= small issue, 3=not an issue; the lower the mean score the bigger an issue). It also shows the 'top five' barriers to paid employment (**in bold**):

1) being able to take time off at short notice (Mean=1.56),

2) lack of suitable/affordable childcare (1.62),

3) lack of suitable jobs (1.81),

4) reluctance to give up the OPFP (1.81) and

5) not enough time with children (1.83).

Table 3.12: Barriers to Paid Employment
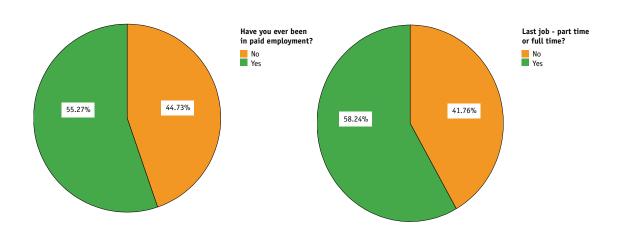
		Mean	Mean (City)	Mean (County)
1	I have difficulties due to my health condition	2.77	2.78	2.78
2	I have difficulties due to my disability	2.92	2.92	2.93
3	I am not sure I would be better off financially in work than I am on the OPFP	**1.81**	**1.81**	**1.82**
4	My parent(s) would not like it if I worked	2.96	2.98	2.96
5	I would have problems with transport to/from work	2.50	2.57	2.46
6	My ex partner/spouse would not like me working	2.96	2.97	2.99
7	My confidence is low at the moment	2.24	2.30	2.21
8	I do not have the qualifications or experience to get the kind of job I would want	2.05	2.12	1.99*
9	Employers are not very family friendly	2.23	2.24	2.26
10	There are few suitable education and training opportunities in the local area	2.24	2.52	1.91*
11	I want to look after my child(ren) myself	2.01	2.05	1.93
12	I would need a job where I could take time off at short notice to look after my child/children	**1.56**	**1.67**	**1.43**
13	I care for someone who has a health condition, disability or behavioural difficulties	2.83	2.84	2.85
14	I am not prepared to leave my child(ren) in the care of anyone other than my family or close friends while I work	2.18	2.33	2.01*
15	My child/children would not like me to work	2.59	2.65	2.51
16	There are few suitable job opportunities in the local area	**1.81**	2.09	**1.49***
17	There is not enough suitable, affordable childcare around here	**1.62**	**1.65**	**1.59**
18	I have personal or family troubles that need to be sorted out	2.57	2.61	2.53
19	I am concerned about the leaving the security of the One Parent Family Payment	1.93	**2.03**	1.84
20	My family or close friends are not able or live too far away to provide Childcare	2.07	2.08	2.15
21	I am worried I will not have enough time with my children	**1.83**	**1.84**	**1.83**

A comparison between City and County dwellers reveals some significant differences in mean scores in some of the categories (rows marked with *). This suggests that respondents in rural and urban areas differ in their ratings of the significance of some of the (perceived) barriers to paid employment. However, the 'top five' are mostly the same, with the exception of category 16 – 'few suitable job opportunities' – which is in the 'top five' overall as well as in the County but does not make it into the 'top five' for City dwellers. Instead, concerns about leaving the security of the OPFP are in the 'top five' for those in the City. Once again these findings are also reflected in the qualitative interview data which indicates that those parenting alone tend to prioritise the wellbeing of their children and that they are also concerned about financial stability now and in the future.

Prior employment is likely to shape respondents' priorities in relation to future employment and the kind of job they expect to get. The data shows that more than half (55%) of those respondents who were not in paid employment at the time of the survey had a paid job before. Of those who worked before, more than half (58.2%) worked full-time (20 hours and more) while 41.8% had a part-time job (less than 20 hours) before (see Chart 3.8). This said prior employment had no significant influence on respondents' search for work over the past 12 months (Item B2, option 8).

Finally, the OPFQ asked respondents to specify how old their youngest child would have to be before they would consider taking up paid employment (Item B19). Answers ranged from less than one year to 23 years, with an average of 6.6 years, which is slightly above school-going age, and a median of 5 years. Again, this seems to support findings presented in the qualitative section of this report which identify the child(ren)'s school as an important and affordable childcare facility for parents who are considering returning to work/education.

Chart 3.8: Prior Employment

d) Goals and Aspirations

Item B6 asked participants to state their aspirations for the next few years. The two top answers revolved around taking up part-time or full-time work/self-employment (27% and 19% respectively; see Chart 3.9 below). As regards participants' choice of future jobs, the OPFQ revealed that 296 participants had considered a particular job that they might want to do (Item B7). Very few respondents (n=9) stated explicitly that they would like to start their own business. Respondents were interested in a range of professions, though the majority could be group into one of the following:
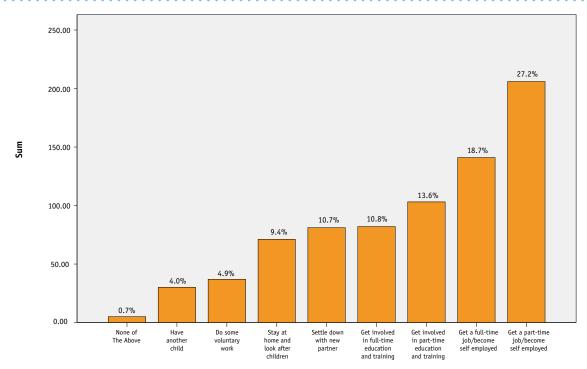
 1) *Health or care professions* (e.g. childcare, care for the elderly, counselling/therapy, youth work, special needs assistant),

2) Clerical/secretarial/ IT work (e.g. accounting, banking, office work, sales and customer support, translation, IT),

3) Work in the service sector, including hotel and gastronomy (e.g. beautician, hairdressing, interior designer, chef, catering, hotel management, receptionist, tourist guide, cleaning, home help, shop work) and

4) Teaching (e.g. primary, secondary, career guidance, special needs teacher).

Item B11 asked respondents who were not in paid employment at the time of the survey to list their priorities over the next few years (Chart 3.10). Their five main priorities were:

1) Getting some/more qualifications (21% of answers),

2) Building self-confidence (16%),

3) Getting permanent accommodation (16%),

4) Staying at home and bringing up the kids (12%) and

5) Building and maintaining a good relationship with family (9%).

Chart 3.9: Aspiration for the next 3 years (multiple answers possible)
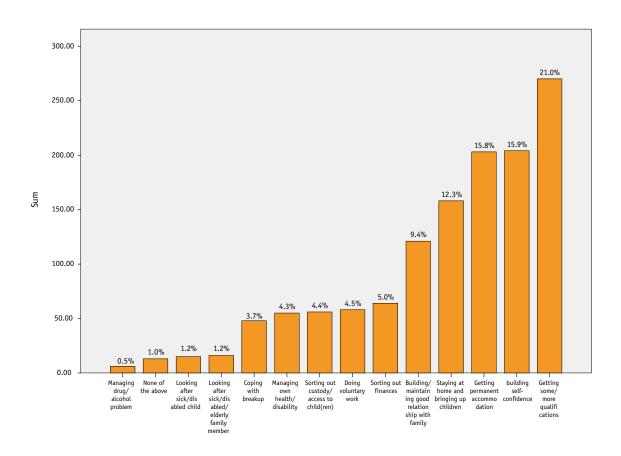
$n_{\text{VALID CASES}} = 409$; $n_{\text{VALID RESPONSES}} = 756$

This indicates the importance of the family for many respondents as well as their desire to improve their qualifications, build confidence and find a permanent home. Moreover it is important to note that the quantitative findings match some of the key outcomes of the qualitative interviews, in particular regarding participants' desire to end their dependence on the private rental sector by either acquiring their own property or securing more permanent accommodation through other means. Similarly, the

emphasis on self-development and obtaining further qualifications (e.g. Leaving cert, FETAC certificates, TEFL, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees) as well as parents' concerns about achieving financial security and ensuring the well-being of their children is clearly reflected in the qualitative interview data.

Chart 3.10: Priorities over the next few years (multiple responses possible)

3.4 Employment

Section C of the OPFQ focused on respondents who were in paid employment at the time of the survey to explore their situation in more detail in relation to both work-related issues (e.g. difficulties to stay in the job – Item C6) and family matters.

Duration and Nature of Employment

Item C1 asked respondents to estimate how long they have been working in their current job (in months). The 259 respondents who filled in this question had on average worked for 37 months, however median and mode – two key measures that are more robust in relation to outliers – were much lower and very similar (Median = 23; Mode = 24). This suggests that the average is skewed by a number of outliers and that a figure of approximately 2 years is perhaps more representative. Interestingly, more than two thirds of respondents who answered C2 – is the job part-time or full-time – stated that they have a part-time job (68%), compared to only 32% in full-time employment (nTOTAL=258). Job descriptions provided by respondents under C4 show that the majority of them work in (overall, this closely resembles the job profiles listed under Item B8 above);

1) *The service sector*, including hotel and gastronomy (e.g. hairdressing, beautician, waiting tables, bar, chef, cleaning, home help, shop assistant, cashier, taxi/hackney driver, receptionist),

2) *The area of social/child/health* care (e.g. care assistant, childminder, youth worker, Montessori teacher, resource teacher, special needs assistant) and

3) *Clerical/administrative/IT-related positions* (e.g. accounting, administrative assistant, office manager/administrator, data entry clerk, customer service, sales, and programmer).

Finally respondents were asked to list any changes in circumstances that made it possible for them to take up a job. The list included
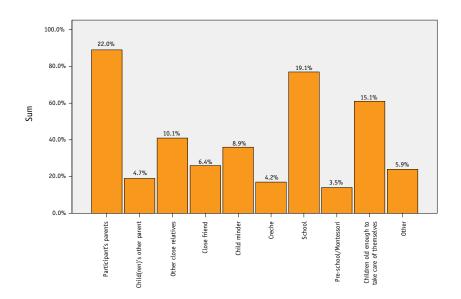
1) *Childcare-related factors* (e.g. affordable crèche, good childminder/babysitter, child(ren) entering or returning to school, child(ren) being old enough to look after themselves),

2) *Support from the family* (e.g. grandparents looking after children),

3) *Work-related factors* (e.g. flexible hours/part-time work, accommodating employer, FÁS scheme) and

4) *financial reasons* (e.g. Back to Work allowance, ability to work part-time without losing benefits, financial pressure/unemployment of other family members makes return to work necessary).

Childcare

Childcare has been identified in previous sections as an important issue for one parent families. Item C5 asked respondents who were in paid employment at the time of the survey to specify who is looking after the child(ren) on most working days (multiple answers possible). The picture that emerged showed that there are three main groups responsible for childcare whenever the respondent is working:

1) The respondents' own family (parents – 22%; other close relatives 10.1%)

2) The school (19.1%) and

3) The children themselves once they are old enough to look after themselves.

Chart 3.11: Childcare on Most Days (employed only – multiple answers)
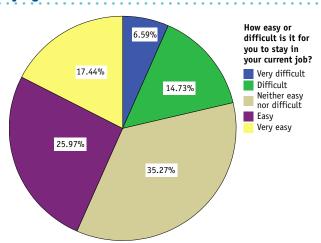
This confirms the suggestion made above and in the qualitative interview section that respondents wait until their child(ren) enter school before taking up employment (again). In contrast, the child(ren)'s other parent, friends and the formal childcare sector (childminders, crèche, pre-school/Montessori) play a much smaller role.

Staying in the Job: Opportunities and Difficulties

Item C6 required respondents to rate how difficult it is for them to stay in their current job. More than 20% stated that they find it (very) difficult to stay in their job (slice 1 and 2 in Chart 3.12). However, more than 40% said that they find their current job (very) easy to cope with (slices 4 and 5).

Chart 3.12: Difficulties Staying in Job

Item C7 revolved around respondents' perception of issues that affect them on a daily basis and that may have an impact on their ability to stay in the current job (big/small/not an issue). Table 3.14 contains a list of potential difficulties and the mean scores

(3-point-rating scale, 1 = big issue, 2 = small issue, 3 = not an issue; the lower the mean score the bigger an issue). The 'top five' issues that concern respondents in paid employment are (**in bold**):

1) Not sure whether better off financially,

2) Stress combining work and family life,

3) Unforeseen extra spending,

4) Lack of suitable, affordable childcare and

5) Not enough time spent with children.

This illustrates the difficulties in balancing work and family life (time) as well as some of the new financial strains that arise in relation to holding a job and bringing up children.

Table 3.13: Issues Affecting Respondent's Ability to Stay in Job

	Mean score
I have problems with transport to and from work	2.81
I am worried I do not have enough time with my children	**2.10**
I am not sure that I am financially better off in work	**1.95**
I had not anticipated all the extra things I would need to spend money on now that I am in work	**2.08**
I have difficulties working due to my health condition/disability	2.81
My child/children do not like me working	2.51
My ex partner/spouse does not like me working	2.98
My parents do not like me working	2.94
My confidence has taken a knock since I started working	2.85
There is not enough suitable, affordable childcare around here	**2.09**
My child(ren) is/are not happy in childcare while I am at work	2.74
I am not confident my childcare arrangements will continue	2.46
My employer is not very family friendly	2.78
I am finding it difficult to adjust to having money coming in every month rather than every week	2.79
There is a lot of pressure in my current job to work longer hours, stay late or do overtime	2.49
I find it stressful combining work and family life	**2.05**
I cannot see this job going anywhere, no promotion prospects	2.20
I am not enjoying working as much as I thought I would	2.50

3.5 Education and Training

The concluding section of the OPF questionnaire – Section D – focused on those respondents who were involved in training or education at the time of the survey. Questions in this section revolve around childcare, (perceived) difficulties in relation to staying involved in the course/educational programme and issues regarding respondents' ability to stay in their current training or education.
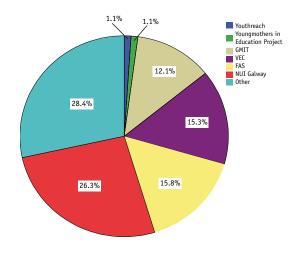
Duration and Nature of Education/Training

Item D1 asked respondents to estimate how long they have been attending the current education or training programme (in months). The 189 respondents who answered this question had on average been involved in education/training for 17 months, however median and mode are again much lower and close together (Median = 8; Mode = 6). Less than half of all respondents who answered D2 – is the course/ training programme part-time or full-time – stated that they took up a part-time course (42%), compared to 58% in full-time education/ training (nTOTAL=193).

The list of course/programme titles (Item D3) provided by respondents included courses at degree and diploma level (e.g. BA, BSc, Diploma, HDip, PhD), FÁS and FETAC courses and IT qualifications (e.g. ECDL). As regards the location of the courses and programmes (nVALID = 188), the overwhelming majority took place in Galway City (e.g. NUIG, GMIT, GIT on Fr. Griffin Road, GCC, FÁS centres). Locations outside Galway City were largely confined to population centres (e.g. Athlone, Ballinasloe, Loughrea, Tuam). A small number of respondents (n=6) stated that they took a distance education course (e.g. Open University, International Foundation for Adult Education).

As regards providers of education and training programmes, we can identify the large City-based third level institutions (NUIG, GMIT) as well as FÁS and VEC as key organisations (see Chart 3.13 below). The category 'others' includes GTI, Galway City Partnership, the Open University, collaborative efforts by above providers (e.g. joint projects run by FÁS, NUIG, GMIT and VEC), private teachers and organisations (e.g. private tutor), Fáilte Ireland as well as various community-based initiatives.

Chart 3.13: Providers of Education/Training Programmes
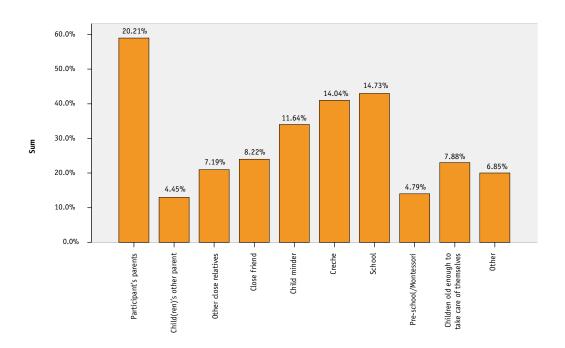
Childcare

Item D7 asked respondents who were involved in training/education at the time of the survey to specify who looks after their child(ren) when they attend courses or programmes (multiple answers possible). Interestingly, we can again identify three key groups here which play a significant role in relation to childcare:

1) The respondent's parents (20.2%),

2) The formal childcare sector (childminders – 11.6%; crèche – 14%) and

3) The school (14.8%).

Chart 3.14: Childcare (Education/training only – multiple answers)
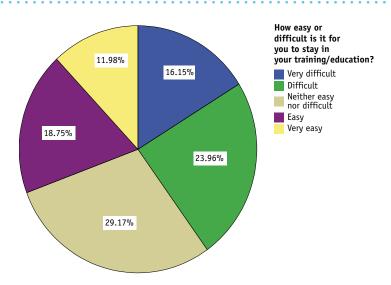
This suggests some differences between those in employment who rely on their families, school and their own children once they are old enough (item C5 discussed above) and those who chose to return to education/training which are likely to be attributable to respondent's financial situation as well as their place of residence/proximity to educational and training facilities (City versus County). Moreover, these findings reflects some of the results presented in the qualitative interview section of this report which show that the decision of those parenting alone to return to education is shaped by their perception of the school as a safe place for their child(ren).

Staying in Education/Training: Opportunities and Barriers

Item D6 asked respondents to write down the changes in circumstances that made it possible for them to start/return to education or training. Here we can identify a number of key factors which partly resemble the point made in section C above regarding (returning to) employment. Financial considerations played a significant role (e.g. access to VEC grant, Back to Education allowance, free fees, sufficient savings, loan approval from the bank or credit union). This said, some respondents also

stated that financial pressure was a main driving force behind their decision to start/return to education. The issue of childcare also appeared to have a significant effect on respondents' ability to access or return to education/training (e.g. availability of affordable childminder/crèche, family members willing to mind child, child(ren) starting school). Motivation and determination played an important role too, with some respondents stating that they want a better job in the future and a better life for themselves and their children. Finally, improved access and mobility was a relevant factor for some, with a number of respondents stating that owning/having access to a car made it easier for them to avail of education and training opportunities.

Chart 3.15: Difficulties Staying in Education/Training

How easy or difficult is it for you to stay in your training/education?
- Very difficult
- Difficult
- Neither easy nor difficult
- Easy
- Very easy

Pie chart values: 16.15%, 23.96%, 29.17%, 18.75%, 11.98%

Question D8 gave respondents the opportunity to rate how difficult it is for them to stay in their current training course/ educational programme. More than 40% stated that they find it (very) difficult to stay involved (slice 1 – 16% – and slice 2 – 24% – in Chart 3.15). In contrast, only 31% said that they find their current job (very) easy to cope with (slices 4 – 19% and slice 5 – 12%). This shows considerable differences between those in employment (see Chart 3.12 above) and those who are involved in training/education.

Table 3.14: Issues Affecting Ability to Stay in Education/Training

	Mean score
I have problems with transport to and from the training centre	2.70
I am worried I do not have enough time with my children	**1.98**
I am not sure that I am financially better off in education/training	**2.32**
I had not anticipated all the extra things I would need to spend money on now that I am in education/ training	**1.95**
I have difficulties in education/training due to my health condition/disability	2.91
My child/children do not like me being in education/training	2.74
My ex partner/ spouse does not like me being in education/training	2.97
My parents do not like me working being in education/training	2.98
My confidence has taken a knock since I began education/training	2.85
There is not enough suitable, affordable childcare around here	**1.96**
My child/children are not happy in childcare while I am in education/training	2.74
I am not happy with the childcare my child(ren) is/are receiving while I am in education/training	2.82
I am not confident my childcare arrangements will continue	2.43
My education/training is not very family friendly	2.65
I need guided support with preparing assignments and projects	2.39
I find it stressful combining being in education/training and family life	**1.72**
I cannot see the point in being in being in education/training there are no job opportunities	2.56
I am not enjoying being in education/training as much as I thought I would	2.69

Item D9 then required respondents to select issues that affect them on a daily basis and which influence their ability to stay in education/training. (big/small/not an issue). Table 3.15 contains a list of potential difficulties and the mean scores (3-point-rating scale, 1 = big issue, 2 = small issue, 3 = not an issue; the lower the mean score the bigger an issue). The 'top five' issues selected by survey respondents in training/education include **(in bold)**:

1) Stress combining family life and education/training,

2) Unexpected extra spending,

3) Lack of suitable, affordable childcare,

4) Not enough time spent with children and

5) Not sure whether better off financially.

This closely resembles the pattern discussed in section 4 above in relation to those in paid employment.

3.6 Discussion

The results of the OPFQ reflect the complexity of one parent family life in Galway City and County and shows that OPFP recipients do not constitute a homogenous group but differ significantly in their needs, experiences and coping strategies. In particular their social and economic circumstances tend to vary and this affects both the quality of life of those parenting alone and their experiences looking for and taking up further education, training, or paid work. Many respondents are concerned about the financial implications and possible economic insecurity they associate with the transition from OPFP and related payments (most notably rent allowance; see also qualitative section in this report) to paid employment, education or training. On the other hand, the OPFQ has shown the significance of social support networks that many (not all) parents can draw on, in particular with regard to parenting support given by grandparents and other members of the family.

Housing represents a key area in which one-parent families differ from the wider population. One-parent families are much more likely to rent from private landlords and this has implications in terms of price and permanency of accommodation. These respondents often express a desire to either find a more permanent home or perhaps even own property. In this context rent allowance plays a crucial role, sometimes acting as a barrier to taking up employment or education/training (see also qualitative part of this report).
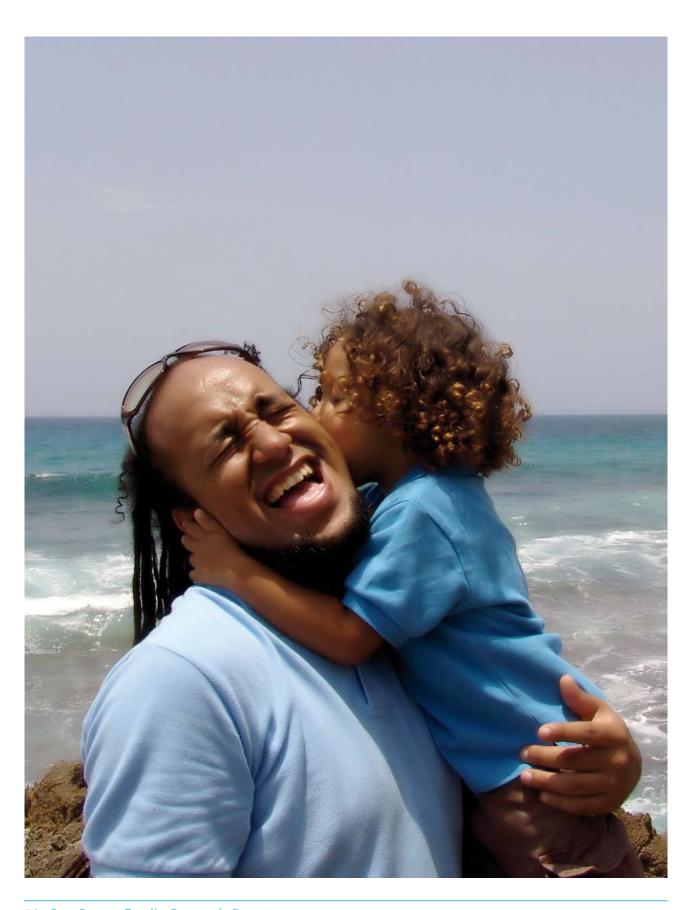
Access and mobility also play a crucial role in relation to employment, education and training opportunities. It is here that rural-urban differences seem most pronounced. Many jobs, services and educational programmes continue to be based in Galway City and some of the larger population centres in County Galway. This makes it difficult for rural-based parents to access these services and facilities, in particular if they do not have (the use of) a car. Distance education was mentioned by some respondents as a possible alternative but numbers availing of such courses remain small.

The availability of part-time work/education and training courses and flexible work/study hours appears to have a significant impact on the decision of those parenting alone to start or return to paid work/education. In a small number of cases, working from home or in the local area provided a much needed opportunity to have a small income and/or to experience social contacts outside the family. This said, support from members of the family regarding childcare often remains a very important factor even in cases where part-time options are available.

Finally, it was possible to identify many parallels with the qualitative material presented elsewhere in this report. The need for financial security, the wish for a safe and permanent home, and a good work-life balance that allows parents to look after their children and take up paid employment, education or training are three key issues that emerged from both the OPFQ results and the qualitative interview data.
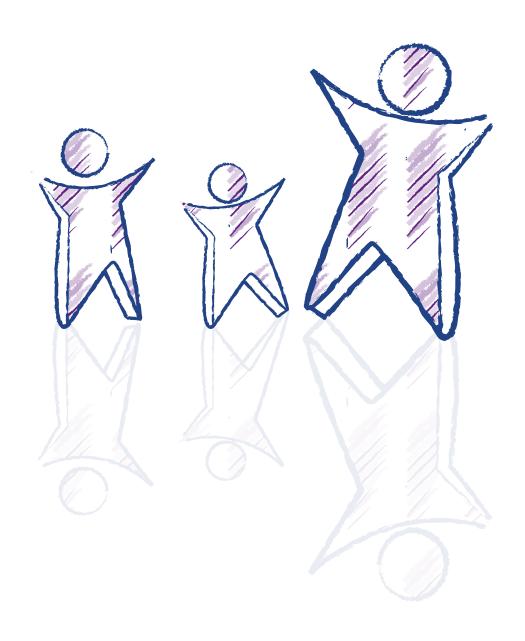
3.7 Summary

- One parent families in Galway City and County form a demographically diverse group

- Mothers with children make up the largest number of one parent families

- The head of one parent families are across all age groups

- 20% of OPFQ respondents classified themselves as non-Irish nationals

- Older parents are more likely to report health problems and respondent's perception of health (but not their reported health status) affects their quality of life

- Location – urban versus rural – significantly influences access to employment, education/training and OPF services of those parenting alone

- Housing insecurity, cost of renting and dependence on the private rental sector are key issues for many parents who parent alone

- Family in general, and parents in particular, provide vital support in parenting, thereby enabling those parenting alone to return to work/education/training

- Barriers to employment/education/training include financial concerns, housing constraints, childcare issues, limited availability of suitable jobs/courses, accessibility issues and difficulties balancing work and family life

Chapter Four

The lives and experiences of One Parent Families in Galway City and County

4.1 Introduction

In total 60 interviews were carried out with one parent families who are in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment and living in Galway. This section of the report provides an overview of the lives and experiences of those parenting alone in Galway City and County and some of the main issues identified by the participants as challenges or barriers to their social inclusion. Some of the sections refer to specific questions that were asked in the interviews, others are highlighted here because of the importance of these issues in the lives of those parenting alone. Many of these issues play a significant part in their decision to return to or remain in education, training or employment and will be examined in detail.

4.2 Profile of the Interview Participants

Of the 60 participants two were male, 38 have never been married, 21 are separated or divorced and one has been widowed. Thirty are living in the City and thirty in Galway County. Two participants identified themselves as being members of the Traveller community. Twelve interview participants identified themselves as being from outside Ireland: one is Pakistani, one is Lithuanian, one is Estonian, two are from the Congo, two are Nigerian, one is American and four are British. One participant has six children, three have five children, seven have four children, ten have three children and 14 have two children and the remaining 25 have one child.

Of those not currently in education or training ten have been to university though not all have completed their courses, 15 have technical qualifications, seven have completed FÁS courses, two have completed VEC courses and one has completed Youthreach training. The employment history of the participants ranges from waitressing, social care workers, secretarial, banking, factory workers, retail, bar work, cleaning, child-care, mechanic, teaching or instruction, hairdressing and beautician.

Participants were asked if they had ever moved house since they began parenting alone and we discovered that 14 families had moved location had for various reasons. This does not include moving house within their original location. Of the parents that moved, eight moved to be closer to their family for support and help in bringing up their children, three moved to be nearer to educational opportunities, two moved because of problems with the child's father, one parent moved to be closer to friends, another had to move when she became pregnant as she was no longer permitted to live in the family home and one moved to escape from anti-social behaviour in Galway City.

4.3 Parenting Alone

The parents spoke about how they adjusted to parenting alone and how important it is for them to have a good relationship with their children. There was a sense from the parents that their children take centre stage in their lives and that all decisions were based on how they would affect their child's well-being. Some parents commented on the difficulties they experienced when they first became a parent, how difficult it was adjusting to being a parent, how much attention a baby needs and how exhausting rearing a child can be. Others spoke of a loss of independence resulting from having a child:

"At the start it was strange because she was so small and you know I was still a child and just, I didn't know what I'd do and it was easy for the first year because she wasn't walking and she was easily amused if you know what I mean. But around the time she started walking that's when the craic started ... studying for the Leaving Cert you'd be so tired you'd want to go to sleep when she goes to sleep but you knew that you had to go back studying and I'd be up some days at five or six."   (Jacqueline)

"Cause you're used to being say young and free and kinda coming and going as you please and then you're just kinda sitting there with a baby not knowing what to do" (Amanda).

However, some participants felt that being at home all the time had a positive effect on their children. Parents argued that it gave their children emotional stability and a routine and ensured that things like homework were done. Many of the parents highlighted that their day and routine revolves around their children and in some instances their children are what keep them going. Parents want to provide their children with a good example of parenting and adulthood and the importance of children having good manners and being well behaved was also discussed.

4.4 Poverty

"*…poverty is a big thing with being a lone parent*" (Úna).

Participants were not asked specifically about their financial situation or household budgeting in the interviews. It was however, notably present in the data as a key factor in the lives of those parenting alone. Key areas of discussion were managing on a tight budget, the necessity for budgeting, financial problems and debt the stress this caused and being stuck in a poverty trap and wanting to become financially independent. The stress of managing on a tight budget was highlighted by all of the participants in this study:

"*I'm in a council house so my rent is what? €30 a week, I get €229 a week … by the time you pay ESB and my rent and stuff I have €157 a week I manage to budget … trying to organise your money and finances and stuff yeah it's hard, you like go to town, you see something, you can't afford to buy it. But I mean you get on with it, just once there's a roof over your head, there's ESB and there's food that's all you can wish for*". (Orla)

Many of the participants admitted that they found it difficult to buy enough food for the household and to maintain a nutritionally balanced diet. This is compounded in the rural experience where only small convenience stores were accessible to participants and this adds to the expense. Participants stressed that trying to ensure that there is enough food in the house until the end of the week was a constant strain:

"*I'd be more inclined to look at the labels; look at what was the sugars and carbohydrates where now I'll go for the bargains I see as cheap*". (Patricia)

Parents explained the planning that was involved to ensure that essential bills such as rent, food and electricity were paid and then juggling larger bills such as fuel and waste charges. Having to manage money in this way was described by many of the parents as a skill. Many respondents handle this by paying €10 or €20 a week into their ESB account and using their Child Benefit for bigger expenses such as wheelie bin charges and fuel:

"*It's not easy but it's not hard either, it's just you have to curtail everything and I do. I'd hate to see people that aren't able cos I would be in Ballinasloe by now I would. I'm very good money wise, I suppose I was brought up that way*". (Amy)

"*I mean the lone parents is below the poverty level anyway, it was a nightmare, out and out nightmare. I'd try and spare the electricity to have it for the kids d'ye know? I'd be sitting here at night time knitting their clothes in the candle light! [laughs] I'm telling ye*". (Geraldine)

Living on a tight budget means that extra activities such as swimming are unaffordable for both parents and their children. Parents also spoke about not being able to buy toys for their children with the exception of Christmas and birthdays. Some participants depended on family and friends for toys for the children:

"*It is hard to get her toys and things sometimes I go to charity or to friends, like I don't know how they knew but. Once the vice-principle of the school called me and would say she doesn't mean to insult me but she has something and she see that my daughter is very tall that her daughter has outgrown her bicycle and could she give it out to my daughter. I told her I didn't mind, I was so happy, it was a big relief you know?*" (Wakiuru)

Many respondents explained that they found it especially difficult to get by on a limited budget as their children a got older because they want to have the same things as their friends, such as brand name runners and labelled clothes. New clothes were not an option for some of the participants who rely on hand-me-downs from friends and family for themselves and their children:

> "I've broadband now because my teenage son he's into BEBO and that and if he doesn't have that he's not the same, he doesn't fit in with all the rest of the children". (Edel)

For some participants getting by on their current income has led them to have financial problems as a result of increases in the cost of living, difficulty in attaining credit, the financial cost accrued during separation from their spouses and borrowing from family members in order to cope with day to day expenses. Many participants spoke of the difficulty in just making ends meet and worrying about how they would pay bills:

> "I mean its so difficult kind of to live on such a, you know to be able to pay bills, a certain percentage on rent and then you know get the usual groceries and still be able to maintain some sort of decent life for the children and for myself. So I find it really tough at times and I'm glad I'm on my own because being in two abusive relationships I was far worse off but at the same time it's extremely hard to be the sole provider and the sole carer to the children". (Rachel)

Several parents spoke of living week to week with their one parent family payment and keeping their child benefit for larger bills such as ESB and fuel as well as clothes and footwear for the children. Thursday is currently the day that OPFP is paid and some participants find themselves with no money by the following Monday and have to either get by with what food they have until Thursday or try and borrow money or get food on credit at a local convenience store:

> "Some mornings it's trickier than others, say Tuesday and Wednesday that would be absolutely pandemonium because I have no lunches for my kids. So it's whose on in the shop where they'll give you stuff on the book until Thursday and if you didn't pay last week and that same person is on this week that person will know. So come Tuesday and Wednesday it's a real frustration because my kids mightn't have lunch going to school but on a normal day it runs fairly smoothly when you've got money my day goes better". (Sarah)

Others admitted that they have had to resort to loans and some spoke of using credit cards in order to get by. One respondent has run up over €3000 in credit card debt another €5,000 in order to pay for oil and withdrawing cash for day to day living and is servicing the loan by paying the minimum payment each month:

> "If I didn't have a credit card I wouldn't be able to survive, so I survive on my credit card but it's nearly up to €5,500 … I got the oil out of the credit card and I still need to get more … how I pay my credit card is, there'll be maybe all my money out of my lone parent that week to pay off the credit card for that time to keep them off me back" (Laura).

Many of the parents had credit union loans for common household appliances and furniture as well as paying overdue bills. Some parents resort to borrowing from their own parents this is often more convenient as the repayments are flexible:

> "I continuously borrow off my mother and pay her back and that just kind of keeps going in cycles … I currently owe Mam about maybe €1,500 which isn't an awful lot considering I've got this far cause as soon as I work in the summer I pay her back a certain amount and it's constantly to-in and fro-in but that flexibility is the biggest thing because if I didn't have that, I suppose I'd have some with the Credit Union but it wouldn't be the same" (Emer)

Some parents spoke of the difficulty in attaining larger credit from lenders. "Nobody wants to give you a mortgage; nobody wants to give you a loan" (Leanne). This had led some to turn to moneylenders as a last resort for loans to pay bills. Some of the parents who are separated from their spouses have had to deal with bills left over from the marriage and selling the family home. Other participants found leaving the family home and setting up a new home for them and their children very expensive. Lack of consistency in maintenance payments contributed to the problems.

"In the beginning he paid maintenance I was getting €170 a week … all of a sudden it stopped and that's when the mortgage ran into arrears and the Credit Union went into arrears and everything went haywire" (Maura).

As the parents are living on such a tight budget many admitted that unexpected expenditure can send their whole management system into disarray. One parent explained that having to pay for something like a bottle of Calpol means there is less money for food that week. The stress of constantly having to manage on a tight budget was highlighted by many parents.

Several parents spoke of their wish to be financially secure and out of debt and in some instances this included the hope to be able to earn enough money that they would no longer need OPFP. Some parent's admitted that they were sick of being in debt and struggling to make ends meet. They found it difficult not being able to buy their children the things they liked and hoped that by getting a well paid job they would be able to get off benefits this was as much for their self-esteem as it was for the desire to work. Many of the parent's believed that for some the only way the family could be financially secure was for them to return to employment at some point:

"I want to get back into you know working full-time and that and not be on single parents allowance. I'd love to see the day that I could just ring them up and say 'There you go, thank you very much, but that's it for me!' I really, really would and I know in my heart and soul in the next year I will be working full-time" (Fionnuala).

4.5 Social Exclusion

Increasingly social exclusion is being understood as a multi-dimensional concept which views poverty as entailing more than a lack of money. Individuals are said to be socially excluded when they cannot participate in those 'normal' activities that the majority of the population can. Often participation is prevented due to the absence of money to engage in such activities. As such we asked the participants if they had any hobbies or interests outside of the home and if they have the chance to socialise. The hobbies and interests identified by the participants tended to involve those which did not cost a lot of money in particular walking, running and reading books from the library as well as watching television and listening to music, visiting friends and voluntary work in their local area. Financial circumstances are what prevent most of the parents from pursuing hobbies or interests outside of the home including being involved in local organisations in a voluntary capacity.

"I'd love to be on committees, I'd love to go to meetings, there's plenty of things going on during the week but I just have to say in a few years Annette the eldest, I know she'll be able to look after the other two, if I go out between eight and ten to a meeting or anything locally that I'd be comfortable with that but for now its ot an option". (Irene)

For the majority of parents they either had very little opportunity to socialise due to the expense of going out, being able to afford a babysitter or were restricted by not having a reliable and trusted babysitter. Parents highlighted that when they went to the cinema or swimming it was often with their children. Many admitted that the only time they had to themselves was when their children were in school. Some participants described that they can only socialise when the children spend time with their other parent as this was a time when they do not have to pay for a babysitter. The majority of parents admitted that they would only go out if a member of their family was willing to baby-sit. This was due to not having to pay a relative in some instance but in others it was because they did not trust anyone else to mind their children:

"I wouldn't trust a babysitter that's why it only my brother that baby-sits her. You see young people, say, bringing in their friends and coming in to their houses and drinking and not looking after them. You wouldn't trust anyone so that's why I don't have a babysitter ". (Amanda)

For those parents with no family members living close by trying to find a reliable and trustworthy babysitter makes going out extremely difficult. Yet respondents saw value in being able to socialise, albeit occasionally, for the own self esteem, mental health, and their ability to parent alone. Many of the participants admitted that they feel quite isolated since beginning to parent alone:

"None of my friends actually had children at that age which was quite isolating because you can't do the same things as you used to do and you're not the same person really as you used to be". (Breda)

"It can be very lonely, it can be isolating, I suppose depending on how you are yourself if you have personal problems then the lone parenting would seem like you know an extra burden, an extra draining on your strengths. Like it's a very fulfilling role being a mother but it's very, very tough and when you're alone there's nobody to sort of chat things over with, little problems or worries that are niggling you all the time" (Úna)

4.6 Housing

Whilst participants were not asked specifically about their housing situation it was highlighted by many interviewees as causing significant problems and stress in their lives. The majority of issues centred on those parents in receipt of Rent Supplement in private accommodation:

"If I go back to work I cannot earn more than €90 a week cos otherwise they would take all the rent supplements and then I would have to pay that by myself … so it would have to be like a really good job like for €500 or €600 a week to cover childcare and everything. It's impossible I know so now just for a while just sit at home and do nothing" (Mkweli).

The Rent Supplement system was criticised by parents on the grounds that it inhibited recipients from taking up employment where they would earn over a certain threshold a week as their Rent Supplement would then be deducted. Other participants highlighted that it has prevented them progressing to postgraduate studies as they would also lose their Rent Supplement (this is due to restrictions on the Back to Education Allowance). All of the participants in receipt of Rent Supplement are on the local authority housing list but some reported waiting for from three and half years to five years for a house.

Others argued that the current Rent Supplement 'caps' are not in line with the actual rental costs in Galway. Many of the participants admitted to supplementing the true cost of the rent which is not permitted by the criteria and also had to rely on their landlord agreeing to this. This causes major financial problems for many parents who in this study that are forced to pay extra to their landlord to secure a place to live. This extra money mainly comes from the OPFP leaving recipients short. Some participants reported the difficulties they have experienced in finding suitable accommodation as many landlords do not wish to have Rent Supplement recipients as tenants. Other parents described having to move home every time their rent was increased as the Rent Supplement did not make allowances for this:

"I rent this place for €800 only by fluke but the landlord has tried to put up the rent and Health Board won't do anything 'cause you get assessed every six months and the Health Board couldn't care that the kids were in school here …my landlord is a nice lad he accommodated us. By they couldn't care less that we're settled in a house and we're all happy and is school is there and everything's great. But to have to uproot again and move checking the paper there's nothing to rent at €800 like". (Brigid)

A small number of the parents' are living in their own parent's home. Whilst this provided stability and support it was reported by some as being stressful for all the family at times. This was mainly due to overcrowding and having to share a bedroom with their child. However, many of the participants admitted that sharing the household bills and having support outweighed the difficulties.

Securing permanent accommodation or buying their own home was a goal or priority for over half of the parents interviewed, Security and stability is desired as many have had to move house frequently they see themselves as being in a vulnerable position in that the landlord could ask them to move at any time and that disrupts family life.

"I'd love to just have a home you know? That would be an ambition to just have a home, a house from the council, a house from whoever, just somewhere that I could paint the walls, cause as you can see the walls her are manky or change the manky carpet that's been down for the last fifteen years … things that go wrong but that you can't fix cause it's not your house! That would be nice" (Isabel).

4.7 Stigma

As with many of the other issues discussed in this chapter participants were not asked about stigma yet 34 of the 60 participants spoke about how they feel society perceives them as individuals who parent alone and the experiences they have had in relation to this. Some of the participants acknowledged that social attitudes have changed as more people have begun parenting alone. Others felt that parenting alone has become more acceptable in Irish society. Despite this shift, parents spoke of how upset they were when they began parenting alone and they were afraid to tell family members because of what they would think:

"I think initially when I started out and became a single mum I was kind of terrified to tell people, I thought I'd be judged 'God, you know, how humiliating' and stuff like that but I suppose I've done work on myself over the years and I don't carry that weight anymore. You know whatever it is 'whose out to judge the judges'? There's nothing I can do, I judge myself enough without taking on anybody else's". (Deirdre)

"One old woman said to my mother 'I'm sorry for your trouble'. That's something you say when someone dies!" (Jacqueline)

All in all it emerged from the data that generally the stigma attached to parenting alone has changed. Rather than being judged on moral grounds, many of the participants felt that general society labels them as "sponging off the state":

"I never found any of it easy I mean one man commented to me one time that I deliberately got pregnant for the money … some people look at lone parents as if they're sponging off the state, which isn't true either because they've no idea how hard it is and it's not as if you have a baby just to get the money because there isn't enough of the money …. It's not as if I got pregnant for the craic of it!" (Shonagh)

Many of the parents spoke of feeling guilty about depending on the OPFP as it makes them feel that they owe somebody something. Others felt that being on benefits is not socially acceptable. Many of the parents that are currently in education and training are motivated not only to have a better standard of living for them and their children but also to get off benefits.

"Sometime I wish I wasn't at college and I was at home when you've so many essays and stuff. But I think it's a drive I have I'm not going to sit back and keep taking the welfare 'cause it just does nothing for my self-esteem. Going into that post office every week is horrible no matter how good you feel about yourself that day its horrible coming out of there". (Cathy)

Some of the parents admitted that they did not want to socialise because people would gossip about them. Others found being at family functions alone with the children and no partner quite difficult. A few participants found that some family members have not spoken to them since they began parenting alone.

"… Then who wants to date someone who has four children? They think you're easy. You know? They just go "Oh right, you've four kids, oh great, where are we going, your place or mine?" I get that a lot". (Niamh)

Other parents' spoke of how they feel have been discriminated against because they are parenting alone such instances included trying to rent accommodation, not being able to secure loans, not being called to interview or given work and a sense of being discriminated for being at home looking after their children. This formed a wider debate in the context of shifting values surrounding the role of women as mothers and workers and some parents believed that society no longer accepts that a woman

should stay at home. Several of the participants felt that more needs to be done to highlight the reality of life for those parenting alone as this would help to eliminate prejudices and stigma. Irene who runs her own company from her home as well as being the primary care giver to her children talks of how working in the home is no longer valued;

"All the other parents that I know are all working and it's just kind of strange how things have gone because suddenly, you know, it's not good enough to say you know, 'well I stay at home. Actually, you know, I don't go out to work, I stay at home and I do housework'. I mean that's down on the floor, kind of, work. That's the status that that has. I mean, in a way, thank God that I have the company at home because if I was to say to people I don't do anything – I do the cooking, cleaning, washing, I look after three children but you know that wouldn't go down well at all. You'd be living off the social welfare then and sitting on your bum drinking tea every morning:" (Irene)

4.8 Health

Participants were asked how their health is at the moment as ill health could prevent them from returning to education or employment. Only 19 of 60 (less than one third) of the participants rated their health as being good. The main types of ill health reported were being run down or worn out, conditions associated with the menopause, back problems, high blood pressure, heart problems, asthma. The most cited illness however was depression. Seventeen participants spoke openly about being depressed at the present time or in the past.   The causes of the depression included postnatal, the breakdown of a marriage or relationship with the child's other parent, an abusive relationship and sheer exhaustion from parenting alone with little support:

"I'd an awful lot of problems to do with money even today it's still a stress on me … I know what it's like depression, suicidal, I've been there, I've been depressed, I've tried to commit suicide once because I didn't think that I would be able to manage to get the following morning out of my bed and have food on the table for my kids." (Patricia)

The majority of respondents spoke of experiencing stress in their lives. The causes they cited were varied but were directly linked to the challenges of parenting alone. Parents admitted that dealing with the worries and issues of parenthood, handling family finances and having to make big decisions about their children's future alone was extremely stressful:

"I think as a single parent you worry more about them getting hurt, you know there's nobody else to pick up the ball if anything happens it's down to me to get it sorted. I find that very hard, I mean there are some decisions I have to make completely on my own and I never know if I'm making the right one". (Tina)

For those working or in education they found balancing life at home and outside of the home very stressful particularly during busy periods. For some still living at home with their parents caused tension whereas for others trying to find suitable accommodation was adding to their stress levels. Relationship breakdown was a significant stressor. Subsequent relations with the children's other parent was often described as stressful due to negotiating maintenance and access to the children. Eleven of the participants mentioned that they were smokers when asked about their health.   This tended to be in the context that their health was good but they are smokers and they often justified it as a stress reliever or the one treat or luxury they allowed themselves:

"I've made huge sacrifices the only luxury I have is literally smoking, do you know what I mean? Which isn't a luxury I know it's bad for me whatever but it's kept me sane along the road" (Elaine)

4.9 Relations with the Children's Other Parent

As stated above of the 60 participants, 38 have never been married, 21 are separated or divorced and one is widowed. Parents were asked if they had always parented alone and this often lead to a discussion about the relationship they and their children have with their child's other parent. In the case of those participants who have never been married the relationship with the other parent tended to breakdown shortly after the child was born or before the child reached the age of two. This tended to be due to the fact the relationship was not working out after the child was born even though in many cases the parents had been

together for a number of years. However, in some instances the break up was due to physical abuse, drinking or the other parent not wanting to deal with the responsibility of being a parent:

"Like you don't go into marriage, like, thinking you're going to get separated so it wasn't things that we had looked into or anything" (Kelly)

For those participants who had been married and are now separated or divorced the breakdown of the marriage was caused by physical and or verbal abuse, alcoholism, extra marital affairs and for some the separation came 'out of the blue' with no explanation. However, for those who spoke of separating it was in the context of the difficulties that arose after the split. For some parents who were in an abusive relationship dealing with debt accumulated during the marriage was a significant problem:

"He left me up to me eyes in debt I just didn't know where to start in the beginning 'cause I'd always been depending on him, I never paid bills and stuff like that, it was always he done it and everything. I got out of the house once a week to go shopping; it was an abusive, violent and abusive relationship. So it took me a long time to get myself back up on my feet". (Orla)

In many cases the separation was distressing. Several parents reported the separation as being "traumatic" on the children. Parents described how children stopped sleeping, began over-eating, ended up sleeping with their parent at night, and were bullied by other children in the neighbourhood because their parent had left. Hence, not only were the parents dealing with their own emotions after the relationship broke down they were also trying to support their children:

"After we were separated my children were getting bullied 'cause you know with the Traveller Community that everything spreads like wildfire right? I don't know about the settled community but my kids were going to school 'Oh I heard your Daddy's gone' you know? And a lot of things happened and it wasn't my kids fault and kids then put up with bullying!" (Patricia)

Many parents described negotiating the maintenance process and access as very difficult and stressful. Parents found it difficult to navigate the court system. Getting maintenance was a struggle and often the OPFP was reduced as a result of receiving maintenance. When maintenance was irregular this was particularly problematic:

"He never paid any and he's not going to and he never will … I'll go back to court I think he's going to end up having to go to jail. No he has no relationship with his kids but that's not nice he's their Dad. I have worked my butt off to put them all through college and their Dad would go to jail rather than pay towards the litre of milk that I put into my tea that now really kind of annoys me". (Zoë)

In terms of the access the situation varies greatly for the children and the parents. Almost one third of the parents interviewed said that the children saw their other parent on a regular basis. This would usually be once a week and was reported as being important for the child as well as giving the primary carer some time to themselves. Others spoke of the irregularity and unreliability of the other parent seeing the children and wishing that this was not the case as they would like the other parent to be more involved in their children's lives.   There was frustration among the respondents at the fact that the child's other parent could not be brought to task and that there was no monitoring system. Some participants spoke of how the other parent gets to do the fun things with the children and they are left to make all the decisions and discipline the children:

"He doesn't see her as much as I'd like him to see her maybe it's a bit unfair but I see him as a fair weather father, he's around when the times are good and I feel like I am the only one parenting. He'd be around about once a month but I' the bad cop, it's always good times with Daddy, it's Mommy that's the bad one you know". (Gillian)

Participants were not directly questioned about the level of support that they receive from their child's other parent's family. However, a few parents highlighted it as an important form of emotional and practical support. Some mothers tried to remain friends with her child's fathers' parents. This type of support when received was valued.

4.10 Support Networks

All of the participants stressed the importance of having informal support networks. Those in education or training found that they would not be able to parent alone or return and remain in education and employment without this type of support. Informal support networks provided parents with both emotional and practical means of managing their children and their job or education. The participants highlighted that family members offered parents with a significant level of practical support and were the main providers of childcare. There was a sense from all of the participants that family members provided them with an emotional support. There was a feeling from the participants that making parenting decisions alone was stressful and having a high level of family support helped to ease this somewhat.

"If you don't have that [family support] if you don't have people that understand what you're going through, that you can call on and say 'Look, I'm going to crack up' or [on] a Sunday 'Can you take him for a few hours so I can do something?', that sort of thing. It wouldn't be possible. It is very stressful." (Brenda)

Participants also described how family members could be relied upon especially if a situation arose suddenly.

"I went in to town on Wednesday for a few hours thinking 'I'll be out at lunchtime' you know and come half two a friend of mine rang me and I said 'Hold on, I've to ring granny and see if she could pick up Jill'. Just knowing that I didn't have to break my neck, yeah, that makes such a difference you know? That's the big thing you know? That's what I find my big difference now, that I would be very very lucky in that sense alright you know? For somebody else, I mean, it must be horrendous." (Leanne)

It was felt by many that the support received from family was incomparable to other forms of support and that one couldn't ask of friends as they do of family. Some of the participants also relied on their family for social interaction especially if they did not live near any of their friends. Some of the parents also highlighted that they received a significant level of support from their older children. Older children were able to mind their brothers and sisters or look after themselves. This enabled parents to engage in activities outside of the home without the added cost of a childminder. Older children also provided parents with emotional support and encouragement:

"Plus now my oldest is old enough to take care of them during the holidays and that, you know. So that was a big bonus as well." (Jane)

"And my sixteen-year-old does give me a level of [support] you know, going to Dunnes, nipping out for ten minutes or half-an-hour instead of dragging all the kids with you." (Sarah)

However not all respondents had family support. This was mainly due to family not living near the parents, family members had passed away or that their family were unhappy that the participant was parenting alone. For those parents this meant that it was very difficult for them to meet new people or make a social network.

"I literally have no friends because how could I? I'm with the kids all the time and with, you know, just being paid the minimum amount that you can…I would have no money to socialise or anything. Not with them…And you just kind of feel stuck and without the support of your family…what do I do, you know?" (Kate)

Participants highlighted that a lack of family support emphasises the fact that they are parenting alone.

"If anyone in the house has a class we all go there because I can't leave them behind me...We all go to Irish dancing...We all go to football...we're like a...flock of sheep or something." (Irene)

Lack of family support means more reliance on friends. Participants highlighted that their friends provided emotional support which helped them to cope with parenting alone. There was also a sense from the parents that good friendships gave them a feeling of security and that they could rely on friends for help:

"I've made a very very good friend...constantly on the phone to each other and constantly in and out of each other's houses...she's the type now who'd do absolutely anything for you and she's a great friend to have and...I think everybody needs a friend like that..." (Debbie)

"I think he kinda did a lot for me you know? Someone to go out and talk to and that because I've only one brother...and he is married and like that they have their own family and all that, and my parents are dead and I've no sisters, you know that kind of way? And Joan is seventeen now and she's going out more and I do be on my own..." (Gemma)

Some of the participants admitted that they lost touch with friends after they began parenting alone mainly because they could not socialise as much as they used to. Parents found that this was due to living on a tight budget, or that they had more responsibilities or because they had developed low self-confidence. Parents described how losing touch with friends made them feel lonely.

"Another thing is you're isolated as a lone parent...it's very lonely like you know?...my friends pretty much abandoned me when I became pregnant...slowly and slowly they all just drifted away, which is grand you know, I understand it like...there was a time like probably up to before I became pregnant when I was going like, 'God! Someone's pregnant! That's terrible! Oh! So terrible!' You know? (Isabel)

Other participants found it hard to retain friendships as their friends did not have children. There was a sense from the parents that this meant that they had less in common with their friends and as a result they were isolated from them. Other participants admitted that unless their friends were willing to adjust to how they socialise together they could loose contact with each other. As many of the parents could not afford babysitters they would rely on friends to call to see them:

"I'll invite them in the afternoon to my house and I'll cook them lunch because I find I don't get to see them, because it's just with three such small babies it's very hard to go to other people's houses unless they've got children". (Faye)

4.11 Supports that are needed

Many of the parents' spoke of what they felt should to be done to support people who are parenting alone. Several participants argued that there should be some sort of group or centre established that could provide parents with emotional and practical support and information. Parents also highlighted that these centres should be locally based to ensure they are easily accessible. The availability of such support was essential for those with little or no family support in particular:

"There are a lot of single parents out there that are isolated, that don't have their families near them, or have broken up and taken it bad. I mean they need, it's not just financial support and stuff like that they need emotional support and stuff like that. There could be you know, kind of every so often, somewhere along the line that there's information given out about places they can go or who they could talk to and stuff like that because it's not that easy being a single parent..." (Orla)

In addition, some parents felt that there was a need to provide children with more support especially if there had been a relationship breakdown. Many admitted that their children found it difficult to cope with this change:

"No-one came to find out how the kids were at any stage during the separation. I think it's an essential because the mother...more times than not is going through a crisis, you know? ...And it isn't fair really 'cause the kids have to put up with you no matter what way you are, you know...I think it's essential for an odd time that they...come down...to ask the kids directly how they're going and listen to them..." (Kelly)

Participants also felt that there was a need for these centres as they found it difficult to find out information about their options for training or employment:

"Like even a guidance counsellor for lone parents or something would be great...I just think that there's no way that I can be the only one feeling like this...[you] need a place you can go...telling you your options, what you can do, how you can...start. You know? Once people kind of start in a direction...it's like rolling down a hill, a snowball and...I want that." (Kate)

A number of participants highlighted the need for someone that could explain clearly to parents about their benefits and entitlements.

"Someone to talk to when you're in difficulties and someone to talk to...when your money's being stopped and you've no one to go to and they won't answer you on the phone and they won't listen..." (Paula)

Conversely and importantly, several participants were critical of the fact that there was not enough support provided for parents who wanted to stay at home. Many felt that their main responsibility was to raise their children and provide them with a stable home life. In this regard a number of parents who were at home admitted that when their children were older they would like to work or return to education. However, at the moment they were prepared to put their children's needs before their own and felt that this decision should be supported by formal structures:

"Now that I'm not working my kids are blooming...I've never seen them more happy ...their homework has gotten better... they don't have the matching bedrooms...but...it's not important to me right now. My kids are important to me and in eight years time, in ten years time, I can have the extensions, I can get the leather suites but I've done my work and job as a parent. And I don't really think that work is part of the job at all. Support at home is what we need." (Sarah)
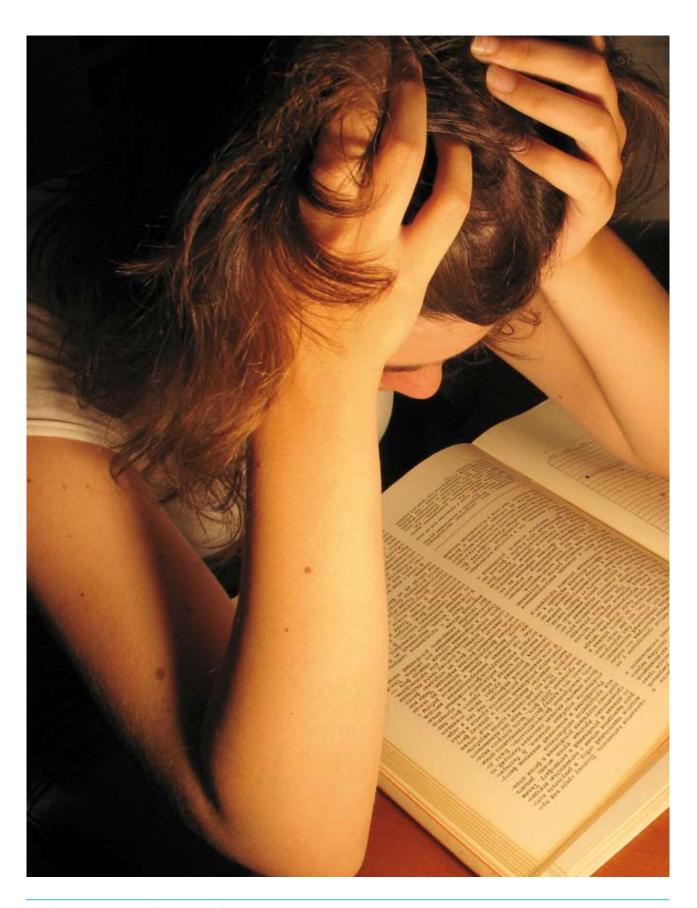
4.12 Summary

- Sixty interviews were undertaken with parents from a range of backgrounds and experiences including the parents who are working, parents who are in university, parents in training programmes, parents who work in the home, parents who are newcomers to Ireland and members of the Traveller community.

- Poverty is a very real facet of the lives of those parenting alone in Galway City and County. Managing daily life on a low income was one of the most striking features of the interviews.

- Debt was common experience among the participants and financial security was a stated desire of many of the participants.

- Social exclusion in the form of being unable to engage in activities outside the home in any form is evident.

- Housing insecurity was highlighted by many participants as being a major stress in their lives. Many problems were encountered with the Rent Supplement Scheme in private rented accommodation.

- Stigma is still acutely felt by many people parenting alone. The focus of the stigma has changed however from moral grounds in the past to parents experiencing society as perceiving them as 'sponging off the state' and not valuing their role as a parent.

- The above described experiences (Poverty, housing insecurity, and stigma) have a very real impact on the interviewees' well-being including their physical and mental health.

- Support networks were cited as very important with the parents own family providing support in most cases.

- Many of the parents interviewed stated that more information is needed regarding rights, entitlements, negotiating the social welfare system, future options in training, education or employment.

- It was also felt by many interviewees that their role as a parent, a sole parent, was not adequately valued and more value should be put on their parenting role.

4.13 Conclusion

The picture painted by those parenting alone in Galway City and County of their lives and experiences in a one parent family in receipt of the OPFP is a stark one, fraught with difficulties and challenges.   Yet it is also one of resilience, of strength, of managing to sustain healthy family life under the pressures of parenting alone and in particular the financial stresses that this brings. The participants in this study could easily identify the barriers they faced in being 'socially included' but they could also identify the solutions to these barriers. The following chapter further elaborates on these on these matters.

Chapter Five

Barriers to returning and remaining in education/ training and employment

5.1 Introduction

Participants highlighted certain issues that made it difficult for them to return to, or remain in employment, education or training. These can be divided in to personal and practical concerns. On a personal level parents identified issues regarding their children such as the effect that working or being in education or training has on their children, the age of their child, feeling guilty leaving their child and the type of childcare used. The level of family support, time management skills and their self confidence levels were also acknowledged by the participants as being a barrier to returning and remaining in education or training or employment. On a practical level, participants highlighted financial and physical obstacles, some of which are specific to either education and training or employment. All of these will be discussed in turn in order to understand the impact these barriers have on those parenting alone.

5.2 The Impact of Working, Education or Training on Parenting and the Child

"This is what I have to say about the government, they're promoting childcare all the time, please promote parents being at home if they want to … it's great for parents who do want childcare but please, you know, for the parents who do want to stay at home and be with their children which is the most wonderful thing you could ever do for them if you choose to do that … the most important thing is the children's childhood. Being reared in the best way they possibly can is the most important thing." (Edel)

As outlined in chapter four participants felt very strongly about their role as parents. The main concerns expressed in the interviews centred on how work, education/training would affect this role and also the lives of their children. Many of the participants highlighted certain factors, such as the age of their children, a feeling of guilt, becoming stressed and tired and having little time to spend with their children, as impacting on their role. Other issues such as children getting sick, children having a disability and parents being carers for elderly relatives were also discussed.

Many of the participants who had been in paid employment since they had become a parent felt that it wasn't worth all the extra stress in terms of the impact it had on them and how they subsequently parented their children. Some respondents talked of working around Christmas time in order to bring in extra money and they spoke of how stressful they found managing everything. In particular, they often mentioned how irritable or stressed they felt and how this subsequently changed the way they were as a parent:

"I was hairdressing for two weeks around Christmas just to get extra cash in but it wasn't worth it to me really 'cos I'd get up in the morning cross. It wasn't that I was cross so much but there's too much to do with motivate them to get to school and organise dinners for them 'cause they'd be back at four and I wouldn't be back like until seven or eight like, 'cause the traffic in Galway is crap. So it wasn't that I didn't want to go working, it wasn't feasible for the kids' sake and for peace sake." (Kelly)

However, it wasn't just combining paid work and parenting alone that caused the greatest concern for parents. Some participants did not like the fact that there was nobody there for their older children when they came home from school. Many of the participants stressed that a parent should be there at that time as well as at weekends. Therefore, spending time with children was seen as a priority in parenting. Participants highlighted when children are in school as the appropriate time to work or attend courses as this enables them to be there when they return from school to supervise homework, make a hot dinner and ensure that teenagers in particular are not out on the street, in essence providing the children with structure and stability. Many parents concluded that the benefit of the extra money did not outweigh the negative impact working had on their children and their role as a parent:

"You know if there's no parenting there's no structure. When I was working myself I left the kids and I'll never forget it, it was terrible. They'd come home cross from school and they had to make their own dinner and my daughter felt she wasn't cared for and I'd come home cross because I'd be hungry and tired. You'd be better off having very, very, very little money and just stay sitting under them and minding them and having dinner ready no matter what it was." (Kelly)

The age of the children is a major factor impacting on whether or not the parents feel they are in a position to take up paid employment or return to education or training. There was a general consensus from the participants that it was easier to attend education or return to work once their children started school. Many of the parents explained how they were using school as a form of childcare. This meant that they could engage in part-time work without any childcare costs or return to education and pay half-day childcare costs. There was a sense from parents that by staying at home with the child during these early years that they are fulfilling their role as a parent and provided their children with security:

"I'm doing an important job at the minute … the next couple of years as I said, I'm taking eight years out to rear my family, to rear my kids which is the most important thing to me at the minute and that's by choice. That's the hand I've been dealt with, that's what I have to do." (Sarah)

Some participants highlighted that once their children reached secondary school they did not require any form of childcare and in some cases could look after younger siblings. This eliminated the financial burden associated with childcare which is a barrier for many parents returning to education or training or employment:

"I wouldn't have been able to do it until they got to the age where they were capable of coming home and sitting here and putting on the telly for themselves because I would have had to pay again for someone to sit in here with them." (Shonagh)

Some participants found that once their children were in secondary school it provided them with the opportunity to return to training, education or employment. At this age children were able to give emotional support and encouragement to parents and share household responsibilities with them. This reduces stress on the parent, who can feel overwhelmed by the extra work load of education or training or who has to adjust to working outside the home. Also, through working or being in education or training at times which mirrored the school day, parents did not loose out on time with their child:

"She was old enough really to come home and I would be home shortly after her then. She was old enough, like, to let herself in and make a bowl of soup and that, and then I would be home roughly about an hour after she'd be." (Úna)

Some participants with children in school are actively looking for part-time employment as they feel they would be able to balance home life and employment. Others who are in part-time employment hope to take up full time hours when their children go to secondary school. Yet, many of the parents with children in secondary school found that full time employment or full time education or training was not an option as their children needed them to be at home in the evenings both for nurturing and stability and in the absence of the other parent this responsibility fell on them. The emotional support provided by parents at crucial stages in a child's life was cited by many as significant:

"I think it's a very important time in Susie's life, this is where I can see her going off the rails a little bit…if I'm out of the house and I'm not watching her I know she's going to be going wild and also you're living in an area where there are loads of kids and you know there's a lot of crap going on and everything so that you have to be very kind of …vigilant around them and with them." (Claire)

Some parents spoke of the fact that their younger children are very dependent on them and this makes it harder to leave them with a minder, and commented that such difficulties would ease once the child was older:

"Maybe when she is eight or nine she may understand that you have to go to bed now because I have to study or she would understand a bit more that mammy has to go to do this or that, right now all she wants is to play with me, talk with me." *(Michelle)*

As such some of the parents regard their primary role as being a parent and view paid employment or education or training as something which would prevent them from carrying out that function to the best of their ability. The belief exists among such parents that it is not possible to look after the children properly when working because the parent is not there to see what they are getting up to:

"I'm just thinking an awful lot of values are being lost by women who don't want to end up like their mother but it's...if they take their mother out of it and just put the principles that their mothers had in to it, it would be a lot safer for kids out there now. So it's...and you can't do that when you're away from home. You can't get to know your children. You can't get to know what they're capable of, what they're not...if you're only with them three hours in the afternoon" *(Sarah)*

Some participants spoke of how unhappy their children were when they worked or attended a course and that this was a big obstacle for them remaining there. Parents described how their children voiced their unhappiness with the fact that they were not at home and available to look after them all day. Parents of younger children found that their children were being clingy and upset when they were dropped off to childcare and this made the parents guilty and feel that they were neglecting their children in some way. In some cases children were not reluctant in expressing their feelings to their parents:

"I found it very, very difficult at the start...it was the first time I left him in a crèche and it was very upsetting...I felt an awful lot of guilt of leaving him there. D'you know? With someone else 'What am I doing here? Someone else is minding my child'. (Cathy)

"Recently she said to me 'Mummy do you know parents are supposed to spend time playing with their children' and she said to me 'Oh it's great that you're here now all the time I don't want you going back to work' so when you hear a six year old telling you that!" (Danielle)

Participants also spoke of the fact that by being out of the house they were not fully aware of what was happening in their children's lives. Many described this as a 'juggling act' which was stressful on both parent and child:

"But there was a row in school...and I missed out on it and then having to be told about it and trying to sort it and I'm like 'Oh God! I'm a bad mother and I haven't been at home'...I found that very tough sometimes. D'you know? ... When I'd miss out on stuff that'd be going on and that I generally know about." (Elaine)

The participants were constantly reassuring themselves that they were in education/training or employment in order to provide for their children's futures. Some parents felt as if they were being selfish by returning to education or training or employment, that their children were suffering due to their actions. Some parents commented that as they usually prioritised their children, when the time came to do something for themselves the guilt and stress associated with such actions was considerable:

"When...they get a little bit older and you can actually do something else you sort of feel a bit guilty." (Jade)

"It was nice to get out of the house and meet people but then the days were so long and I'd find when I got home I was so tired ... it was definitely harder because when you're not working you have more time for her, you can play with her more but then you come home and you're just drained even though I'd feel guilty if I didn't play with her then 'cause I'm gone all day, I'd be like she won't recognise me then after a while." (Barbara)

Some of the parents spoke of the organisational and logistical skills required by them in order to get to work or education/training and make sure that the children are cared for.   Participants found that 'juggling' all the aspects of their lives made it difficult to remain in education/training or employment:

"It's not so bad like it's just organisation more than anything else, trying to make sure that if I'm working in the evening that the dinner is ready for them when they come in from school. Its just organisation who has the baby and where's the baby going you know it does get a bit hectic sometimes especially if I'm working an evening and then a morning and then an evening it does get a bit hectic but it's just trying to organize it that's all." (Shonagh)

Some parents explained that it took a while for them to develop a daily routine so that they could manage education/training or work with children and housework. In many cases this involved parents studying or completing course work and housework after their children had gone to bed which was exhausting for them. Other parents found that they could not develop a routine and this negatively affected them, their education/training and their children:

"I just found to get the time that was just the hardest thing. Now some people can manage it but obviously I didn't manage it properly and as I said I really noticed the children were…missing out…and that's one of the main reasons I dropped out…I found it very stressful…I'd put them to bed and then I'd have four hours of study to do that would bring you into twelve, one, two o'clock in the morning and you're back up again. I mean there's a lot of people out there who can do that but …I've talked to people and they either have a husband to support them or they have a wife that supports them…And then I started to hate college." (Claire)

Many of the participants admitted that they often feel stressed and tired when they come home from work or education or training. They acknowledged that they found it difficult to tackle housework, make dinner and still have energy to spend time with their children. Some parents felt that they were not as responsive to their children's needs, which they felt guilty about. Others commented that they would simply miss their children:

"When I was doing my thesis my head was overloaded…I think it's very tough on the children…the parents could be there but they are not mentally there, 'cause the head is so consumed with studying…I wasn't a hundred per cent there for him." (Edel)

Nearly all of the parents who are working or attending education reported being exhausted. Many found that they were tired when they came home and found it hard to face into household tasks. Trying to do all this alone is quite difficult and some parents found themselves being quite agitated and 'snappy' in the evenings. The pressure associated with running a home alone and working can be difficult:

"I don't like my job because I am dealing with customers all day and I am dealing with problems all day and I find when I come home from work I just want to sit down and chill out … I have to get myself dinner as well and at that time of night you don't want to go cleaning." (Michelle)

There was a sense from all the participants that this exhaustion and stress came from trying to juggle all the aspects of their lives, from being a student or a worker, a parent, completing housework and trying to have time for themselves:

"Life is busy. It's constant, you know, from quarter-past seven in the morning until…you hit the bed yourself really. Especially I suppose because I'm in education a lot of my work is done once Robert my son is in bed. So that could be starting half-eight, nine o'clock." (Brenda)

Linked to being tired and stressed is not having enough time to spend with the child even when the parent gets home because there are things that need to be done such as making dinner, cleaning and getting ready for the next day. This often led to feelings of guilt and concern about neglecting the children in some way and conflicting emotions about working or being in education or training to try and secure a better livelihood for the children yet having to leave them all day and being too tired in the evening to play or do fun things:

"If I have a very bad day at work and I'm stressed and I tend to take it out at home on everyone around me and I don't want to do that … so that's the way with working you know I feel like I'm neglecting her and even though I know I'm working for her, I feel so bad for leaving her, I feel really guilty." (Lisa)

Sometimes parents could not prevent their education from interfering in family life. The scheduling of courses at weekends or during school holidays often meant that for some there was no choice but to bring their children with them, which had the effect of completely disrupting the family routine. The clash of course work with housework, again, particularly at weekends, was also cited as being disruptive to the children's lives and limiting the amount of family activities pursued during the period. Parents admitted that this was generally only around exam time or when they had course deadlines. All of the participants stressed that they fulfilled their roles as parents but just not to their usual standard:

"…getting a take-away or just bunging something in to the oven instead of cooking him a proper dinner or…I know he's meant to have his proper uniform on him but I just send him off in his PE tracksuit like because it's just that bit easier…it's hard to know that you're, like, consciously not doing everything you should as a parent." (Anne)

Participants highlighted the fact that when their child was sick it usually resulted in them missing days from their course or having to take time off work at short notice. This was particularly the case for parents who were using school as a form of childcare. Participants found that they could fall behind in a subject which was an added stress:

"Or when the children…fall sick, it's another thing. You have to stay at home, miss lectures and it's not the same as when you are there to take notes or to hear what the lecturer is saying." (Wakiuru)

Some of the parents have children with specific health or learning difficulties and they stated that their needs prevented them from becoming involved in education or training or employment. This was mainly due to the fact that their children require full time care and that care is not available elsewhere. One parent of a dependent adult child spoke of the difficulties she had when she was employed as she did not have fixed hours. She found that her only option was to be self employed and she felt that then she was able to provide her child with the level of care that is needed. Others spoke of the need to address particular health concerns of children, especially when crèches and similar facilities would be unable to cater for such needs:

"At the moment it's the attention he needs, I don't feel he'd get it in a crèche to be honest, I've spoken to friends that have their kids in them and they just don't like the set-up they feel it's a little bit regimental, they have to follow instructions and they if they don't their left out … and the days of expecting your Mother or your relations to mind kids all week for nothing they're gone." (Hayley)

Caring for elderly relatives was also cited as a barrier in returning to employment or education/training. A few of the participants were providing care for their families. Such care tended to span generations, with one particular respondent highlighting that she cares for her grandchildren while her own children are at work and elderly relatives at the same time. Returning to work would simply place an extra burden on them.

5.3 Childcare Experiences and Concerns

The forms of childcare used by the participants included after-school clubs and services, crèches, school time and family members. The cost of childcare and the importance of funding were highlighted by the respondents as being significant barriers to accessing training, education or taking up employment. Most of the after school clubs and services, and crèches had a facility for collecting children from their school which was of great help to the parents. Participants found that this alleviated a lot of stress. Participants who were working could not take time off to collect children from school and bring them to the crèche and those in education often have to miss classes if this service is not provided:

"I have one lecture on a Monday and I've a friend that can pick up Seán for me on Monday but it's only one day a week. There's no-one that I could ask to do it on a regular basis five days a week. My sister then covers if my friend can't do it so and if neither of them can do it then I just have to miss the lecture." (Anne)

Participants identified that crèches and after-school clubs and services also serve as a social outlet for their children. It enables their children to interact with their peers in a safe environment. In addition, parents felt that the daily routine of attending a crèche or after-school club provided their children with stability. Parents admitted that they felt less guilty attending education/training or employment knowing that their children were happy attending their childcare service:

"…and because he is an only child it benefited him because he really enjoyed hanging around with the other kids. So that kind of relieved my guilt. You know? He was happy going in." (Deirdre)

Participants acknowledged that childcare funding or subsidised childcare costs enabled them to return to, and remain in, education or training. Previously, the cost of formal childcare had inhibited both the uptake of, and continuance in, education courses, yet for some once childcare funding was available they were able to return to education and complete their course. The flexibility of this type of funding was seen as essential to allow all parents to avail of its benefits. The attachment of childcare payments to particular courses was identified by some parents as being significant in the uptake of educational courses:

"So if there was a day, like an in-service day, or something that she was home, she was home sick, I could pay someone, you know, I had it there to pay them, it was great." (Rebecca)

However, for others these forms of childcare are notably expensive, costing between €80 and €95 a week for part-time childcare. Such costs added to the stress experienced by many parents. It was also argued that there should be more government funded crèches and after-school clubs and services. This would enable parents to avail of childcare without substantial costs and remove a barrier which prevents many from taking up work:

"In my last job I was a chef and I was only taking home €380 even as head chef and if I was to pay a crèche for two children then that is €250 so I can't afford to go back to work." (Faye)

Some participants highlighted that the funding given to childcare was unrealistic and failed to alleviate the high costs of availing of such services. Other parents felt that with childcare costs they had no option but to wait and return to education or training or employments when their children were older and could look after themselves. Other participants commented on the inadequacy of the amounts provided by some educational institutions for childcare, the rates of which appear to have regressed over the last number of years. One parent suggested that childcare be means-tested so as to ensure that those in need of financial assistance would receive it:

"I think if crèche fees I wouldn't say were paid for but if they were means tested maybe…and you'd have to make sure like if I had my childcare expenses paid for me while I was in college if I was monitored every week it wouldn't bother me." (Elaine)

One of the main problems parents found with formal childcare is that it is not flexible. Participants highlighted that student's hours or part time work hours can often vary and childcare providers could do more to increase the flexibility of the service: Some parents found that their children were not happy in attending crèches or after-school clubs and this was an added stress. It made it harder for the parent to leave their child and alternative care had to be found. Children had problems adjusting to care practices that were different to those used by their parent, while parents identified the restrictive nature of some crèches and after-school clubs:

"He went to it once or twice but he didn't like it 'cos they were just locked in a kind of big hall and they were running around, there was a few things to do his homework but he felt very confined and being forced to be with this group of children…just kind of confinement, this is where you have to stay now for the day." (Edel)

Some of the participants had difficulties accessing childcare facilities due to their location. In some cases, parents were relying on public transport to access facilities but for others, particularly in rural areas, such transport doesn't exist:

> "There used to be one crèche but it got closed down…I just have no way of getting my little ones to the crèche in a car it's about fifteen minutes but there is no hope in walking…I don't drive. I am trying to learn but on the social that I have I just can't afford it." (Kathleen)

While specialised childcare was used by many of the parents, a number of parents used school as a form of childcare. By taking part in courses that were on during school hours or working part-time hours, parents did not have to incur any childcare costs. During school holidays these parents rely on summer camps and friends and family to help out with childcare. Using such informal childcare tends to be less disruptive of family time:

> "I drop my kids to school…and then the course was starting at nine-thirty and it was finished at one-thirty." (Vega)

Some participants had family members who were able to provide childcare. Of those parents who are currently working or have worked since they began parenting alone informal childcare was the predominant form of childcare that they used. Parents were most comfortable with this form of childcare because of familiarity and trust and, for some, a confidence that their children were being cared for in a manner similar to that found in their own home. The cost of this childcare was also minimal in comparison to the formal options and for some this informal childcare is provided free:

> "So I'm paying my mother a small bit so it's not as much as the crèche but its brilliant…I love him being with her because its family, I suppose. So he's happy to be with her and he gets to go home to his own house so he gets to play with his toys." (Cathy)

The fact that for many this type of childcare usually takes place in the child's home was cited as an added strength. This seems to be less stressful on both the parent and on their child. Children are in a familiar environment making them more comfortable and it is easier for them to do homework while parents do not have the added hassle of trying to collect their child at peak traffic times. The significance of having family members that can provide childcare for little or no cost was deemed by many as essential to their return to education, taking up employment or beginning training:

> "If I didn't have my mother I wouldn't be able to do this course…I couldn't pay someone to do what she is going to do for me. I don't know how women in my situation manage without a mother." (Hannah)

However, participants admitted that having family members providing childcare was not without its own challenges. Some parents spoke about how guilty they felt leaving their children with the parents who have already reared their own families and are now having an active role in rearing their grandchildren. Some viewed this as being unfair on their parents as they are too old to be looking after and dealing with the demands of young children at a time in their lives when they should be relaxing and suiting themselves.

Others were upset that their children were becoming too attached to their grandmothers (who were the main providers of informal childcare) and viewed them as their mother. Some participants admitted that this somehow undermined their role as the parent. Parents also found that their children could be confused as they had to abide by the grandparents rules when they were with them as opposed to the rules in their own home:

> "You see my parents look after her, if I didn't have my parents looking after her I just would not be able to work because childcare is just too expensive … I don't pay them unless I happen to have a lot of cash they don't want any money … It is hard to work when you have a child I'm relying on them to bring her up as well, and because she see her father, she has my rules, their rules and his rules." (Michelle)

Yet, these were both deemed a small price to pay for the reassurance the respondents felt about going out to work or education or training and leaving their children where they believed they were safe and loved.

5.4 Poverty Traps and Financial Barriers to Employment, Education or Training

The financial barriers identified by the participants included dealing with a loss of state benefits, the hidden costs of being in employment or education, funding, fees and the cost of childcare. By far the most cited barrier to paid employment and education was a fear of a loss of benefits and in some instances the experience of actually losing benefits when the parents returned to work or education. Those parents living in private rental accommodation and in receipt of Rent Allowance would not in some instances even contemplate looking for employment or furthering their education beyond degree level because of the impact it would have on their income from this payment. Effectively for those parents the Rent Allowance has become a disincentive to work or further their education:

"The minimum wage isn't much different to the Lone Parent's when you count in rent so there's no incentive to work. Why would you work and not be able to stay at home and raise your kids for nothing?" (Anne)

The current system regarding rent allowance prohibits recipients from taking on work that will pay more than €317.43 per week. Once this sum is exceeded their allowance is reduced. Some parents only began to look for work when they secured council housing as the rent allowance was no longer a barrier. Parents who had completed a degree explained that they would have to wait until they were living in a council house before they could return to further their education. Many parents found this disheartening:

"I worked really hard for my degree but …it's disappointing sort of to be sort of not being able to use it or not to go on and sort of get on and do something else…I find that tough."(Rachel)

Many of the participants argued that it would not be financially possible for them to attend education, pay the full cost of their rent and in some cases childcare fees. Other participants admitted that they refused to take up employment as the wages would not be sufficient to cover both rent and childcare. Some of the parents who are working are obliged to work for low skilled and low paid employment which would not jeopardise their Rent Allowance:

"I'm fed up working because you can only work piss poor jobs because if you earn money they'll penalise you. So if I was to work as a Montessori teacher, that I'm qualified in, I wouldn't be able to do the full week at school I'd only be able to take two mornings a week and I'd still be bloody over the limit you know. It wouldn't pay enough, you wouldn't be able to pay enough, it wouldn't give you enough to come off the lone parents, I haven't found one that would anyway." (Geraldine).

Another benefit the parents' feared losing if they returned to work was their medical card. Some parents that are working had already lost theirs. This was seen as a considerable barrier particularly if the parent themselves or one of their children suffers from ill – health. One participant who suffers from depression said she would not go back to work for this very reason. As with the Rent Allowance the loss of a medical card was seen as unfair and a disincentive to work due to the cost of medical visits and prescriptions. One parent told us that she is going to reduce her hours at work so she can get her medical card back. Many parents commented on the impact work can have on important benefits:

"My money has actually gone up and my whole medical card situation I mean they've taken it off me now and that would be my biggest fear I suppose as soon as you get anywhere you get something taken off you and I don't even know if I'm entitled to a doctor only card … I'd rather take a reduction in the Lone Parent's and keep my medical card …. I worry about Ruth getting sick and I wouldn't be able to afford it" (Gillian)

An additional frustration that some parents had with the system was that those in social housing were required to pay increased rent to the local authorities once they began to earn extra income. Whilst there was no argument against such increases issue

was taken with how high the amount they were now paying was. Again as with the medical card this was regarded as unfair to those parents who, in their own words, had got on their feet and were working and trying to bring more income into the home. The Back to School Allowance was also regarded as an important benefit to the parents and they would fear losing it.

Parents reported the financial costs involved in going to work or attending education as an additional barrier to paid employment. Such costs included paying for transport to and from work or the course, cosmetics, clothing, lunch, photocopying and books. Parents who were attending education had access to funding and in many cases they admitted that without this funding they would not have returned to college. The main source of funding was from the County Council through the Higher Education Grant. Participants found that this grant helped to alleviate many financial burdens mainly by paying tuition fees. Participants also highlighted that the maintenance grant helps to pay for the extra everyday cost of attending education:

"I got the grant which is brilliant. Oh my god! It pays so many bills when it comes in." (Cathy)

Many of the participants highlighted the problem of inconsistent funding with regard to certain aspects of education. They spoke of funding being available for a certain amount of time and then it was stopped. The main casualty of inconsistent funding was childcare. This has been exacerbated by alterations to childcare schemes in recent times:

"…we were told all our childcare costs would be covered…just previously there had been some kind of grant available from the community welfare officers for childcare for people but that got pulled the year I came in to college and the only people that were entitled to it were people that had already started." (Anne)

Other participants were frustrated with funding being reduced significantly mid-way through their education. This left parents with bills that they had not budgeted for or with less money than they had expected. Such changes can place an added stress on parents:

"So, for example, last semester I got €700 which covered a lot or helped a lot with childcare. This semester I haven't got anything so far and I've been told that…I might get two or three hundred euro if I'm lucky…you know you budget to what you think you have and that was something that was always there so but this year it isn't and I mean I don't know what I'll get or if I'll get anything…So that's kind of made this semester more stressful than other ones would have been." (Emer)

Some participants highlighted that funding was available for certain courses but not for others. This was frustrating for parents as without funding they could not afford to take the course. Many other participants spoke of the financial burden of paying course fees. In some cases parents were unaware that they qualified for grants that would pay their fees and if they had known this earlier they would not have been under financial strain. Some parents described having to borrow money off family members to pay course fees:

"I think I had to pay €5,000 to do the first year…I borrowed the money off my dad which I'm still paying back to this day. That would have been the biggest barrier." (Claire)

In some cases parents found that they had to work while attending a course in order to supplement their income, in particular to pay bills and the extra costs associated with being in education. This was tiring for parents and often meant that they had little time for their children. A couple of the parents had been working full time while attending education. Participants argued that in order to pay educational fees and household bills they had to continue working. Parents found that this was both stressful and physically draining. They also found that they had little time for other activities. In both cases, the participants could not continue with their education and left without any qualifications:

"And it was really expensive college…and I paid for that college €1,300 and plus for all the exams I had to pay so …I was trying to put everything together, pay for the house, pay for electricity, pay for the bills, feed my mum and my child and myself, go to work and try to do my exams also. I couldn't finish it…I even couldn't get a diploma. That's what's really upset me." (Mkweli)

The cost of childcare was also highlighted by many of the participants as a major barrier to returning to education or training or employment. 15 parents stated that they wanted to work but that they would not be able to earn enough in order to pay for childcare. The cost of childcare was also more significant for those in private rented accommodation as they would not only have childcare costs but could also have to pay rent if they lost their Rent Allowance. One parent said she would need to pay €300 for two children to be minded another quoted a figure of €250, while another parent attending a third-level institution in the City cited the minimal difference in cost between the college crèche and private crèches.

Many parents believed that it is impossible to secure employment which would pay sufficient wages to meet childcare costs. This problem was felt most by those parents who could not rely on family members to assist with childminding either because the grandparents were elderly, ill or not living nearby. In many instances parent's realised that they were financially better off not working once childcare and rent were taken into account;

"I'm a qualified child care worker, I hated giving up my job but I had to because basically I cannot pay for rent and childcare for my daughter out of my wages. I would be left with about €20 or €30 a week to feed myself on or pay my bills. Miraculously enough I just couldn't do it like. People look at you like this is something you really wanted. There's this stigma attached to being a lone parent especially when you're young that you are delighted to be out of work and like you're getting everything handed to you on a plate like. It's not true" (Isabel).

5.5 Individual Barriers

Participants highlighted personal circumstances or feelings that made returning to and remaining in education or employment difficult. These included a lack of family support, low self confidence, being exhausted, language and cultural issues, time management and ill health. Certain personal barriers, such as a lack of work experience and the need for part-time work, the nature of available work and uncertainty if they are better off working are specific to employment, were raised by many participants. Others, such as a learning problem, a fear of education, feeling excluded and family life interfering with a course, also arose in the context of education. All these barriers will be discussed in turn in order to understand how they affect the decision to return to or remain in education/training or employment.

Low Self-Confidence

One of the most pertinent individual barriers for some of the parents returning to education or training or employment was their lack of self confidence. Many felt that they did not have the capacity to succeed in education or training or employment and some participants worried about how they would combine parenting with education or training or employment. Many of the parents admitted that they felt insecure about being out and about and mixing with new people. Parents stated that this was due to the fact that they had spent so many years at home and that it was difficult to rebuild their self confidence. For others their low self confidence stemmed from the breakdown of their marriage or from living in an abusive relationship:

"The main barrier, I think its actually trying to, I just can't blame it on childcare and the kids, it's me to get my confidence up to actually go and do it actually to start meeting people and stuff again". (Orla)

Linked to the lack of self confidence to work was also a doubt about their ability to actually successfully gain employment and a fear around the recruitment process and their own qualifications. Some of the participants admitted that they were unsure what type of job they would like to do and felt they would need to figure that out before they could begin looking for employment. Other participants were worried about their skills level and the impact this would have on obtaining employment:

"I would be nervous sometimes its puts me off because I haven't much of an education and also those aptitude tests they kind of frighten me a bit as for a lot of single parents. Do you know and for interviews and everything, we'd probably be out of practice for doing CV's, you just wouldn't know what to put down. You know when I have been out of work for so long it would be daunting." (Valerie)

The barrier of low confidence seemed to be more prominent among older participants who felt that they were too old to return to employment or education. They argued that they were out of the system for too long and that it would be too difficult for them to adjust:

"Oh I think I'm too old…I'd want to be young and you know? At my age I don't know…I don't think so now." (Gemma)

For those parents whose children are almost eighteen the time has come to think about the future and what they might do and this is challenging for some as it would require having a belief in their own capability:

"Well I'm confused it's like a dividing road you know now that my child is reared … but I find that very challenging because it would mean having confidence in myself, believing that I can earn a living and stand on my own two feet, it's very scary in some ways but I think that at this stage in my life I'm ready to do that." (Edel)

There was a sense from many of the parents that they were constantly thinking they would fail or that they were not intelligent enough to be in education. Subsequently, a lot of the participants were afraid of returning to education. One or two parents explained how a lack of confidence and self belief forced them to leave a course without any qualifications. However, as another parent commented, once they got over the initial fear, their confidence improved significantly:

"…so even the thoughts of it scared me and I thought, well no, I have to go for it…but even doing it and going for the first exam…the confidence you build up and it pushes you to go further and do more". (Rebecca)

Lack of Family Support

Participants acknowledged that family support plays a central role when they are deciding to return to education or training or employment. Families provide emotional support by encouraging and reassuring parents about decisions made and also practical support mainly through child minding. Some participants admitted that they did not have any support from their families when they decided to return to education or training or employment. These parents had to pay for help and support:

"…I've never had any supports and I've always had to create my own little network and pay a housekeeper or whatever." (Zoë)

Many of the participants described how family members could often mind children for a few hours which would give them a break and enable them to catch up on house work or course work. However, for those who have no family support it was difficult to have any time to themselves to get course work done:

"I've no family support up here so I couldn't say to my mother 'You take them for an hour', like and …it didn't work especially earlier on because I had no family here, it would have been sound if I had my mother." (Shonagh)

There was a sense from the participants that they were always questioning if they made the right decision to return to work or education or training. Families often provided them with the reassurance they needed. Yet some parents identified that while their families were close-by, support and reassurance about some decisions made, particularly those relating to returning to education was absent. The lack of such support can cause uncertainty on the part of the parent and further damage levels of confidence:

"…with the rest of my family it would be fine they could go out and work and do whatever they liked and whatever but with me it was kind of because I'm a single parent I should be at home with the kids…my mother didn't have very high opinions of me I was a single parent and that was it." (Orla)

Language and Cultural Barriers

For those participants who are new to Ireland language and cultural issues were stated as barriers to returning to education/ training or employment. One participant spoke of how it was not regarded as appropriate in her community if women worked outside the home and she worried about what her peers would think if she worked. Non-native English speaking parents found they had problems trying to enter in to education or training or employment. Some felt that when they were more comfortable with English they would be able to return to education or training or employment. Others who were in education felt that they were finding a course harder and taking a long time to complete because they could not fully understand English due to differences in dialect:

"…initially understanding the English was a big challenge for me…English I would say is still my first language because it's our general language that we use in communicating. But it's quite different from yours. I'm beginning to learn and get used to it."

(Wakiuru)

Lack of suitable experience and qualifications

Many of the participants felt that as they have been out of paid employment for a number of years they lack the level of work experience which is required to secure employment. Given that some of the parent's previous employment was in the low-skilled sector, such as waitressing and bar work, they felt that this type of work was all that was available to them. However, two parents who have completed a FÁS course on office skills have been unable to secure employment because they lack relevant work experience. This was very frustrating and disheartening:

"It was a part time course … I was kinda peed off then because I couldn't get a job to put it into practice. That's another thing I'm finding hard as well because I don't have experience in an office and it's very hard to try and get into one". (Elaine)

Participants were, by and large, looking for part time work which centred on the school day. Parents felt that this would enable them to use school as childcare so they would have no childcare costs and also would mean that they would not lose out on any time with their children. Many parents also stressed that the type of employment would have to be flexible as this would allow them to tend to their children first and foremost. Parents described that this may mean having to take time off at short notice if their child becomes ill or if their child has a day off school. In particular, school holidays and in-service days can make it difficult to plan work and childcare:

"I mean they have loads of holidays, they have loads of days off school; in-service days or election days or days that people are working on the school … I mean it's many times that I got less than 24 hours notice that the children had no school the next day." (Irene)

By requiring flexible and part time employment the parents are limited in the type of jobs that are available to them. Some of the parents found that their jobs were not challenging enough or reflective of their skills or qualifications and also found that there was little opportunity for promotion. Others felt unsure about whether or not they were better off financially by working, especially as they were now working both in the home and in paid employment, and the impact such work would have on the amount of time available to spend with their children. Parents' uncertainty about whether they were better off working was furthered by the fact that they were often in low skilled employment where the pay is near the minimum wage and the job can be physically demanding:

"You can work in bars and restaurant and you're not paid, you know it's not great money and if you're taking child-minding fees out of that, you're not left with a lot at the end of the week, you're shattered, but you're not left with a lot of money."
(Rebecca)

Ill health

Some of the parents highlighted that they were unable to work due to their own health problems such as back pain and heart problems. In such cases returning to work was sometimes impossible and attending courses could also put a lot of strain on parents. One of the participants explained that they wanted to return to work but was not permitted to medically. Other parents argued that they had to concentrate on managing their illness before they could return to education/training or employment:

"I'm battling with depression at the moment and currently on medication and that I'd have to wait until I'd be stronger in myself to even consider going back to education." (Úna)

Personal Barriers to Education and Training

Some of the participants highlighted that they were experiencing learning difficulties with a few reporting that they have dyslexia. They felt that this meant that course work was more stressful and could take longer to complete. Others felt that they would not be able to succeed in education due to their learning problem:

"I'd love to go back to education, but I know in my heart and soul...it wouldn't be in me, I wouldn't have it to, yeah study, but I just wouldn't have, it doesn't stay in with me."   (Fionnuala)

Participants spoke of being scared of attending a course as they did not know what to expect. For many none of their family members had attended a college course so they felt that there was no one that they could talk to about this feeling:

"None of my aunts or uncles went to college so I'd be the first grandchild to have gone so in that sense, like they were all like 'Yeah. Go up to college. It's great!' but they didn't know what was going to happen when I went to college and neither did I really and you know so, you can't really talk to them". (Anne)

Participants highlighted that it was the fear of not knowing what to expect that was most unnerving. Some parents spoke of fearing being the only mature student in college and their fears around the high-levels of intelligence expected of them, while others commented that a lack of awareness regarding the supports available deterred them from availing of places or even thinking about entering college in the first place:

"...it's all very supportive when you get into university but it doesn't appear that when you're on the outside looking in...it's quite intimidating" (Faye)

However, some those parents who are in college spoke of feeling socially excluded in their course. This was mainly to do with the fact that the participants felt older than the majority of other students that they were unlike the other students, as they have responsibilities:

"...you get to make friends but...you're kind of socially excluded in the way that you can't go out, you can't live the college life like." (Zara)

5.6 Structural Barriers to Employment, Education and Training

Participants identified barriers to employment and education/training that were beyond their control. These barriers can be divided in to those relating to employment, such as the availability of suitable employment and perceived discrimination by employers, and those relating to education/training such as Higher Education Grant restrictions, a degree being insufficient for employment, accessing courses and course requirements.

Structural Barriers to Employment

Many parents stated that they would prefer to engage in part time, flexible employment. This would allow work to be fitted around the school day which would mean no childcare costs and also that they would not lose out on time with their children. Parents admitted that finding such employment which is also paid well was difficult. Many of the parents reported that as they are looking for flexible employment during school hours the nature of work available to them is usually low-skilled and consequently low paid. As such the wages they would receive will not cover the cost of childcare and rent:

"The main barrier for work, for going back to work full-time is to find something that's going to give you a decent wage at the end of the week." (Leanne)

Many of the participants highlighted that the type of employment which suited their criteria was cleaning or minding children. Parents argued that this is work they are already engaged in at home and questioned why they would want to do it for someone else in return for a small financial gain and a lot of hardship. Some parents commented that well paid jobs aren't likely to allow you work four hours a day:

"The quality and payment of work for your two or three hours employment isn't great you know you'll get a cleaning job maybe cleaning houses there's nothing like a State job…". (Sarah)

In the survey it was reported that a large proportion of respondents had looked for employment in the last twelve months. Some of the participants felt that as they were parenting alone they had been discriminated against when applying for work. Many believed that this was because they needed to have flexibility in order to attend to their children's needs:

"Yeah, because…I think because they think I am a single mother, if something…having children sick or something I can't come to work and maybe too much." (Ita)

Structural Barriers to Education and Training

While all of the parents acknowledged that the Higher Education Grant was a great support in returning to Third Level, some found problems in accessing it. Some parents commented that the grant was restrictive in that it could only be used for one degree so people could not change their mind about their career path,

"…It's gone…you've kind of made your bed now you lie in it, you know and don't ever consider changing careers." (Zoë)

The residency rule of the grant further complicated things for some. It meant that one or two parents had to apply under their own parents means which meant that they could not get the 'top-up' grant, even though under the other criteria she was eligible for this extra money. Some of the parents were unsure of the grant criteria and restrictions. They argued that these should be made clearer and more accessible. The majority of the participants were critical of the DSFA restrictions in relation to maintaining benefits and furthering education. The main criticism was the fact that Rent Allowance is not paid to students in Masters Courses. However it should be noted that the Rent Allowance is not administered by the DSFA but by the Community Welfare Office. Others highlighted that for many of the jobs they hoped to do required post graduate training:

"I think my parents are surprised I'm in college so long…but at the same time I think their generation, their thinking is that, you know, 'You have your degree. You'll get work straight away' but it really doesn't seem to be the case unless you go on and get something else." (Deirdre)

Participants admitted that in some cases they had to miss classes or days due to family commitments. Some participants spoke of the difficulty in availing of childcare, particularly if a usual routine – such as a friend leaving or collecting the child from the crèche – is disrupted. The timing of courses can make them difficult to attend. One participant's course takes place at weekends and during school holidays and she found that as she had no regular childcare,

"The course nearly killed me…I was fine as long as the children were in school so …I had to miss a few days, a few lectures." (Irene)

Some participants found that their course workload made it difficult to remain in education. Parents acknowledged that completing assignments and studying for exams usually meant that family time was restricted:

"When I was in fourth year…I was literally dropping Robin off [at the crèche] in the morning and collecting her at six. D'you know? At the very last minute. Just you'd so much to be doing…" (Fiona)

Parents admitted that their day was very long as they usually completed their course work after their children were gone to bed:

"Juggling being a parent and being in full-time education is definitely difficult because it doesn't end at six o'clock. You know? …in most jobs it can end when…your workday finishes. Whereas this doesn't."(Brenda)

Some parents found that they were unable to juggle all aspects of their lives and that it was easier to drop out of their course rather than cope with continuous pressure. There was a general consensus from the participants that it was more difficult to access or attend courses if they lived in the County. This was because the parents felt that there were more courses available in the City. Parents spoke of how they found it much easier to access a course in their own town than having to travel to attend one:

"…when I tried to go out and do the FÁS course it was…grand. It was handy. It was in the town. But there isn't enough of them in it either because they're not putting on enough courses. They're all in Galway City. You have to travel in to Galway". (Elaine)

Others highlighted the significant additional stresses caused by trying to organise family life around bus timetable and course times. Such stress could be reduced if courses were based locally:

"…there needs to be more in Ballinalsoe, its easier for us, the time to get the transport, time to get on the bus, time to fit the bus time-table to be in for half-nine or whatever because some of the buses don't go. It's very hard to get a babysitter early in the morning." (Valerie)

Parents also highlighted the importance of having a car as public transport was irregular or unreliable in the County. The time taken to get to and return from courses made attending difficult for many parents. Participants also pointed out that childcare costs would be higher due to the longer day, in addition to transport costs associated with running a car and the extra personal demands of such a situation:

"…most training facilities would be in Galway or night classes and as a single parent that is not feasible for me…if I was to put her into childcare…it is going off on a bus at eight in the morning, she would have to be dropped off somewhere by seven-thirty and I probably would not be home until seven-thirty at night so it is not worth it at the moment to leave her and I would not have the money to pay for a crèche that would take her for that long."(Michelle)

Certain criteria associated with entering courses were cited by some parents as being particularly frustrating. Other parents, who managed to begin a course, encountered problems as their course required them to spend time in another college or work experience in another location. This was an added stress for parents as childcare arrangements had to be made. In all cases parents could meet this requirement only if they had some form of family support.

5.7 Supports for Employment, Education or Training

It is obvious that many of the supports needed for parents to remain or return to education, employment/training will partly reflect the opposite of the barriers previously outlined. However, participants also highlighted other issues that support them in these areas. Participants identified both structural and personal supports that enabled them to return to or remain in education, employment or training. Personal support included family and friends while structural supports differed between education/training and employment. Those involved in education/training identified the facility and part time courses as being a support to completing a course. Parents who are working identified part time work flexible work and an understanding employer as essential to remaining in employment.

Participants highlighted family support as the most important factor for them returning to and remaining in employment or education/training. Participants identified that the biggest support from family members comes in the form of child minding as already outlined. Parents also stressed that family members provided them with emotional support especially, reassuring them about their decision to return to education/training or employment. Participants also explained how their families encouraged them which helped boost their confidence and enabled them to return to education/training or employment. There was also a sense from the parents in education/training that their families were proud of them which made them more committed to achieving good results and finishing their course:

> "Well I wouldn't have been to do it unless I had the support of my mother and sisters that was the main thing… if it wasn't for the support of my family I suppose I wouldn't have been able to take the job." (Gillian)

> "None of my aunts or uncles went to college so I'd be the first grandchild to have gone so in that sense, like, they were all like 'Yeah. Go up to college. It's great'…I had support as in giving me confidence and the self esteem to go and do it." (Anne)

Participants also described how their friends provided encouragement to return to education/training or employment. They are also able to provide reliable childminding to the parents. Participants highlighted that being in education/training and employment gave them an opportunity to make new friends. These new friends provide study and work support and also make the parents feel more comfortable in their new environment. Participants found that they were able to meet other people who were parenting alone which allowed them to discuss similar problems and feel less isolated. It also made them feel better with their decision to return to education/training or employment.

Educational Supports

Many of the participants spoke of the support given to them by the educational provider. The participants acknowledged that those working in the facilities gave clear information on the services that were available to the parents. Participants also described instances where they were helped to attain these services when employees worked on their behalf:

> "The Mature Students Officer, she was fantastic…if you had any issues you could go to her. She was you know very approachable. So that really helped knowing that there was somebody else there." (Brenda)

The participants also recognised that they were given emotional support by both general and specialised services within the education facilities. This was of particular importance during stressful times due to financial, personal or exam problems.

Participants found that in most cases educational providers were accommodating when they were unable to complete course work due to family issues:

> *"I was supposed to do a presentation and I was just saying to the lecturer I'm really sorry …I couldn't make it I had personal problems but I ended up bursting into tears and ended up telling them about my break up and then she told me all about hers and she was really really kind to me." (Faye)*

Some of the participants were or had taken part in part time educational courses. Parents found that the structure of these courses did not interfere with family life as they usually took place while their children were in school. This also meant that they did not have to avail of any childcare costs:

> *"I spread it over two years and do it part time, so then…it doesn't interfere with the kids' time for school. And I won't have to pay babysitters or anything." (Niamh)*

Employment Supports

The employment supports that the participants identified all centre around being able to work part-time, the issue of flexibility, being able to choose the hours of work, being able to get time off at short notice and, moreover, having an employer who understands their parenting situation and supports them. The participants acknowledged that having a part time job was a key factor in returning to and remaining in employment as it meant that they are only working while their children are in school. They also found that working part time does not interfere with family time and that they do not have any childcare costs. As such the parents are primarily only interested in part time work with flexibility around when those hours are worked. Such flexibility enables them to deal with family issues such as hospital appointments or other commitments. One participant spoke of her situation:

> *"I have a nice little casual job that I can come and go and it's no big deal if I cannot show up for any reason, there's someone to cover… If for instance I had an appointment for Monday I might say 'I don't want to do Monday's hours can I come in on Friday?' and you know they allow me do that … it's been a huge support". (Jane)*

Parents also identified that having an understanding employer who allows them to leave work early if they need to or be out if the child is sick is an essential support to them remaining in employment:

> *"My supervisor she understands because she's kids herself. So she's grand like, if I needed to get off at half two, I'd be able to get off at half two or if they were sick now or anything I'd just ring them and say 'look I can't come'. So that's why I like the job there." (Carmel)*

5.8 Benefits from Work, Education or Training

This section will examine the benefits that participants identified from being in employment, education or training. These positive issues include, meeting new people, an increase in income, getting a sense of self-worth, improved confidence and intellectual stimulation. Parents also identified certain benefits that their employment or education/training had on their children. They noted that their children appreciated them more and also became more independent. All of the participants acknowledged that working or being in education enabled them to meet other people as they admitted that their social life had been very limited. Some parents described how colleagues were supportive of one another when it comes to adapting to family demands:

> *"Its good craic and they're very nice to work for, we're eight women and we all have children and there's no problem to go for an hour to a doctor. Like there's not a lot of places you can do that in you know? So I'm happy there like good fun and we all know each other and we're all good friends." (Amy)*

Many of the parents acknowledged that working or attending courses enabled them to meet others who were parenting alone. There was a sense that this was a comfort to the parents and it made them feel more socially acceptable:

"I think prior to coming back to college I was much more isolated…I didn't know anyone else that…was a single parent or had a child. I was nineteen when I got pregnant and twenty when I had Robert so none of my friends actually had children at that age which was quite isolating…And coming back here I met a huge number of girls in the same situation as me…" (Brenda)

Parents acknowledged that having more money is a big advantage to being in paid employment and many admitted that they were motivated to return to work because they found getting by on the OPFP extremely difficult. Subsequently, parents found that they were not as stressed or worried about household finances:

"It didn't have a negative effect because I mean the fact that I was able to bring in some extra money was a relief in itself. I mean I wasn't fretting and worrying about you know money for basics and money for clothing and for my daughter and that. And I suppose trying to juggle the whole lot, you know, between her needs and trying to maintain a home." (Úna)

Many of the participants described how being in employment or education improved their self-worth and gave them an identity as an individual. Other participants highlighted the effect that working or education had on their self confidence. Participants who had not worked in sometime admitted that they were surprised that they were good at their jobs and also discovered that they had not had much belief in their own capabilities prior to that.

Many of the participants highlighted the fact that their children had become more independent since they themselves had become involved in education/training or employment. This was due to the older children having more responsibility and independence as their parent was not at home all the time doing everything for them. More generally, many parents spoke of a sense of time to themselves:

"I thought 'Oh My God! There's life' after being stuck in the house and actually I find it for the betterment of the kids that I'm going out and I'm not always there at their beck and call." (Maura)

Many of the participants spoke of the fact that being in education/training or employment made them feel more positive and confident which positively impacted on their parenting role. They set higher standards of parenting for themselves and were happier in their roles as parents:

"I feel studying had made me a happier, more fulfilled person, so therefore it has probably made me a happier more fulfilled parent, yeah, it has a knock-on effect." (Faye)

Many participants found that being in education/training or employment meant that family time became more valuable to both themselves and their children. Parents spoke of their day being more structured and making time to play and talk with their children:

"I'll have time to play with her and I'll appreciate playing with her rather than having to play with her all the time to keep her quiet or whatever." (Amanda)

Participants also explained that their children appreciate them more when they are away from them during the day. One parent describes how her son's attitude changed when her course finished,

"I did find that when I was in college that my son kind of really enjoyed the time that I had off whereas now it's become so common that you know 'Mom picks me up' and 'oh I'm so bored' 'I'm so sick and tired of being at home, Mum'. D'you know? This kind of attitude" (Rachel)

Parents found that being in education had a significant impact on their children. By discussing their course participants also expanded their children's knowledge and vocabulary. Children were also happier for their parents to attend courses when they understood what it entailed. Participants seemed to be less stressed when their children were happy about them attending education. Their young children were inclined to talk about what they want to do when they go to college:

"He's really interested in things like history and archaeology and he loves the zoology building so I bring him in a lot and show him around because it's not something he is going to be afraid of when he's older then." (Anne)

5.9 Summary

These interviews reveal a number of important points about those parenting alone in Galway City and County and the barriers they experience to entering training and education, or taking up employment:

- The key concern for many of these parents is the well-being, both physical and psychological, of their children. Being a parent is a key role for these participants;

- For those in education/training, or working, significant barriers exist which make it difficult to maintain their current situation. These barriers are both personal and structural in nature and although often viewed as separate, when they interact can serve to further impede the parent;

- Many parents suffer a sense of guilt about leaving their children to work or attend training and education courses. The inability of some to avail of networks of close family and friends to mind children can exacerbate this sense of guilt. For those who do have such networks, the benefit is almost unquantifiable;

- Parents removed from the labour market or out of education/training for a long period of time are intimidated by their perceived lack of knowledge and skills, and the environment they might be about to enter. While some institutions are good at providing supports for those re-entering education/training after a long period of absence not all are as proactive;

- The impact of a loss – or even potential loss – of benefits if education or training courses are taken up plays very much on the mind of those parenting alone. The financial reality of such families often militates against availing of opportunities to enter education;

- For those seeking to enter employment, the absence of well-paid, flexible opportunities precludes their entrance into the labour market. The potential to be worse off, combined with an inability to take time off at short notice, is an important consideration for these parents;

- An absence of services, along with other structural barriers, such as transport, serves to further complicate the lives of those living in rural areas. The extra time spent travelling to and from urban hubs where services are provided adds to the levels of stress experienced by parents and can distress children;

- Childcare and in particular affordable, accessible, flexible childcare is deemed by many parents to be a key barrier to entering employment, or taking up training and education opportunities. Many cite subsidies as being essential to their returning to work or education, as are after-school clubs. However, others recount difficulties in sourcing and paying childcare, or the facilities not being flexible enough to facilitate a return to education, where only part-time childcare is needed;

- For those parents in education and training, the existence of a number of supports makes it possible to do so. The importance of family is again cited as significant. However the ability to work part-time or to take up training and education courses which fit around home-life is viewed as key. An understanding employer is crucial in this regard;

- The benefits of working or entering training/education are highlighted by parents as being manifold: broadening of social networks, not just meeting other people but meeting other parents in similar situations; greater financial security; greater sense of self-worth; greater sense of confidence and a more positive outlook which can impact positively on parenting.
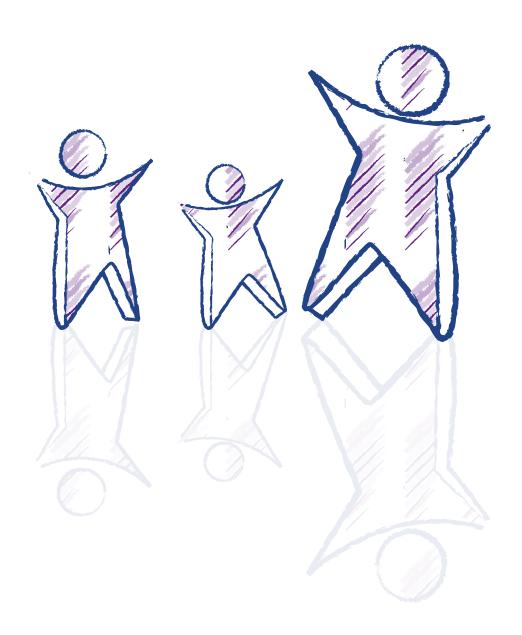
5.10 Conclusion

The accounts featured in this chapter of the barriers faced by those parenting alone in accessing training, education and employment describe a complex set of scenarios facing parents. Chief among the priorities of parents is the well-being of their children, and the impact entering training or education or taking up employment, would have on them. Yet many spoke of the desire to enter employment, to progress in training and education so as to provide for their families and meet their needs. Notwithstanding feelings of guilt, these parents detail how they strive to maintain a home, rear children and, in some cases, work or pursue full-time education. Yet numerous barriers exist which serve to complicate their multi-faceted lives and constrain their desires. Although some barriers are personal in nature, others are structural, caused by inadequate service provision and an absence of real supports which meet the needs of these parents. These accounts identify that while there are many common obstacles facing those parenting alone, the individual traits and circumstances are equally as important in explaining their current situation. Any initiatives developed to socially include those parenting alone will need to acknowledge and address such circumstances.

Chapter Six:

The parents' views and experiences on those organisations that provide services for those parenting alone in Galway City and County

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the findings from the interviews in relation to the parents' experiences with local organisations and what parents feel these organisations could do in order to meet the needs of those parenting alone. The parent's experience of dealing with organisations in Galway City and County considers the parent's views with regard to with various service providers they spoke about in the interviews. Parents described both positive and negative dealings with the service providers and each organisation will be examined in order to highlight these. Participants highlighted the difficulties they had with different organisations such as a lack of information and service not being pro-active in informing those parenting alone of options that are available to them in the area of education/training and returning to employment. During the interviews many parents admitted that they had never heard of a lot of the organisations.

6.2 Parents' experiences of dealing with organisations

Community Welfare Officer

Although the Community Welfare Officer (CWO) is not an organisation per se they provide a service within the HSE. As participants have a lot of dealings with the CWO it was deemed appropriate to ask parents about their experiences with them. Many of the participants found their CWO helpful when they were applying for secondary benefits:

> "I felt the CWO was … caring and supportive and she actually rang me once to tell me I was entitled to another €7 a week or something … Not only that but she said I was entitled to have it backdated … I didn't know that I was entitled to whatever it was." (Faye)

CWOs helped some of the participants to organise their household finances which was a great relief to the parents. Some of the participants found their CWO to be friendly and approachable and enjoyed dealing with them. Other participants highlighted that their claims were dealt with efficiently:

> "When I was moving … I went up and asked the CWO … could I get beds and wardrobes, a washing machine and fridge and she had them down to me within a week … there was never any problem." (Eddie)

It is clear from the interviews that the attitude of the CWO had the greatest impact on the parents' experience of dealing with this service. The majority of the participants had had unpleasant experiences with their CWO. Many parents described how their CWO made them feel as though they were begging for benefits or that they were making false claims. Others found that they were constantly justifying their decision to ask the CWO for benefits or entitlements:

> "The CWO for this area …I think she abuses every session…it sometimes feels like it's a bit of a power play when you go in there. She really makes you feel like your worth nothing and you go in with a genuine reason and a genuine concern and she will reduce you to tears and make you feel as if you're completely stupid. So I really don't have a lot to say about her. I don't like her." (Rachel)

Many of the parents felt that a certain level of confidence was needed when dealing with their CWO. Parents spoke of having to be aware of their entitlements and standing up for themselves. Many noted that this would be very difficult for some parents to do especially if they were dealing with a relationship breakdown or finding it hard to adjust to parenting alone. It was felt that to engage with some of the CWOs parents needed to be confident and assertive:

"I feel for anybody having to approach the CWOs ... not so much from my perspective but young mothers having to face this on their own and having to deal with maybe a low self-esteem and no support and having to come up against agencies which are supposed to be reflecting support are only reinforcing their insecurities ... I think that's a pity...And if you don't have the confidence to kind of stand up for yourself in an appropriate way...and you can't assume everybody has that." *(Deirdre)*

Participants described how they often dreaded the thought of having to resort to going to see their CWO. In some cases parents admitted that they stopped applying for secondary benefits as they could not face dealing with the CWO due to their previous experiences where parents felt that they had been interrogated and their situation or position questioned:

"He gave me a real run down of lying ... that I was with my husband and pretending I wasn't with my husband ... he kind of antagonised me and was aggressive ... after that I didn't feel the same about him in that respect and I tried not to go too much near him if I needed money I didn't go near him ... now the reason I won't ask for nothing and I probably do need a special needs level of money right now ... you know that experience probably put a big damper on it for me. " *(Laura)*

Some of the participants found that their CWO was not forthcoming with information and that they were not proactive in the allocation of secondary benefits. Parents described how they felt the need to be self-informed about their entitlements as the CWO could not always be relied upon to provide them with information:

"There's a lot of people out there who genuinely need help and I think that the CWO's kind of put them off it because they don't tell you what you're entitled to. You have to find out about it yourself. My son made his Holy Communion there a month ago and I had to go down about getting my medical card stamped and ... he told me there was a grant for the Holy Communion and because he'd made it I wasn't entitled to it ... I mean I got into debt for a couple of weeks." *(Tina)*

A couple of participants had experiences where they believed that their CWO behaved unprofessionally towards them. The participants were critical of the fact that the CWO knew their family background and they felt that they were not assessed independently of this. Many of the participants were critical of the fact that their CWO never built up a professional relationship with them. They felt that policies and procedures were strictly enforced by their CWO without personal circumstances being taken into account and that some needed to be more lenient and accommodating of personal circumstances. This is exemplified in the case where one participant earned €2.70 over the income cut-off for the Back to School Allowance and she felt that her CWO could have been more lenient and told us about the impact this had on her:

"I was down money and I thought 'God I really need the Back to School money' so I let the job go ...I was talking to the woman in charge of the CWOs ... I remember her saying 'It was a very borderline thing'...but her instant decision was 'Oh you know you're not entitled to it' ... But I just don't think that was fair" *(Tracey)*

FÁS

The majority of participants had at some point interacted with FÁS. Many of the parents found FÁS staff to be helpful and supportive of the parents' circumstances. Some of the parents found staff to be encouraging which helped them to have the confidence to complete courses or apply for jobs. Many of the parents had been involved in a Community Employment (CE) Scheme. They saw this as a positive experience and helped many to acquire permanent employment. In particular participants appreciated the one to one approach staff employed when dealing with clients:

"I went in to FÁS to look in to a CE Scheme ... and they were fantastic. Really, really good ... you sat down with one person, they did an interview and they set out a lot of things for you and I did get a CE scheme from that which actually led on to me being employed as a relief PA after the Scheme finished." *(Brenda)*

A few participants were pleased with the fact that they were able to progress through different levels of courses. This gave participants a sense of achievement and also meant that all levels of ability were catered for. Other parents highlighted the social

aspect of being involved in a CE Scheme. For many of the participants it was their first time working since they began parenting alone and it enabled them to work on their self-confidence by easing them back into employment. It also provided an informal support network enabling participants to make contacts and explore other options on completing the CE scheme:

"The CE Scheme was the kind of kick-off for me, to get in, and even to get out of the house and getting to know people. But then like, through word of mouth, you know something would be finishing up and someone would say 'Are you finishing there? Well look it go for this', you know." (Rebecca)

A couple of participants found that the courses they wanted to do were not funded by FÁS. Other parents, especially those living in the County, found that they could not access FÁS courses as they had no transport and there were no public transport facilities available. Some of the parents were critical of the fact that FÁS did not keep accurate and up to date information about them. This was frustrating for the participants and some felt that as they were parenting alone they had specific needs that FÁS should be aware of, such as their lack of mobility, as was the case with one participant who lives in Galway City and was offered a position in Ballinasloe:

"FÁS were offering me a job in Ballinasloe and then I thought wait a second, I've explained exactly my situation here and you're offering me a job in Ballinalsoe? … So I didn't bother after that." (Des)

Galway City Council

Some of the participants had experienced no problems or difficulties when dealing with Galway City Council. Many spoke of how the Council were very helpful when dealing with any issues the parents had, such as organising finances so that those who had gotten into arrears with their rent were facilitated to repay the rent in a way that suited them best. Some believe that the City Council has improved in how they engage with clients in recent years:

"They were nice in the end they were saying…we're sorry and whatever, whereas kind of a couple of years ago they had attitudes. But then they have an awful lot to deal with as well." (Orla)

Other parents were frustrated when dealing with the City Council as they felt that staff did not give them clear instructions about what they needed when filling in forms. This meant that parents often had to come back another day to the office which was time consuming and also delayed their application being processed:

"And I goes, 'Well that's not my address, you can't change it over the phone?'. They said 'No, no, no, no, you'd have to come in and change it in person' and I said 'OK so'. Loaded with my ID and everything that I wasn't told to bring in but I thought Jesus, I'd better anyway, and a bill and whatever else, proof of address. They said 'Right do you have ID with you? And do you have a utility bill?' and I'm 'It's as well that I do!' Because they didn't tell me to bring it in with me." (Isabel)

Many of the parents were annoyed with the manner in which their inquiries were dealt with. As with many other organisations the attitudes of staff can have a lasting effect on the parent's attitude towards an organisation. Such queries included wishing to know where individuals were on the housing list and how soon they could hope to receive social housing or for those already living in social housing renovations or maintenance of their home:

"I had my name put on the register for a council house … and I says is there any chance you can tell me where I am on the list? And he just flipped and he said 'Do you think that you're somebody special?, he says, 'You're only on the list for such amount of time and just 'cause you're a single parent', he says, 'doesn't mean … you'll get a house first' … I was so afraid to go back up to the City Council that when I … got a letter to state I had got my house, I said to me mother, 'Thanks be to God' that I'd never actually have to go to speak to him again." (Fionnuala)

Galway County Council

Some of the parents found staff at the County Council very helpful and approachable and never had any problems with them. However, the majority of the participants described negative experiences with the County Council. Many of the parents described having to wait a long time for any repairs to be carried out on their council house e.g. waiting over six months for central heating to be fixed. In some cases participants told us the matter was only resolved when they contacted their local Councillor. Some parents have also experienced difficulty in trying to attain up-dates on where they were on the housing list and that staff were not forthcoming with information. A couple of parents felt that unless they continuously rang the Council they would not get any answers to their problems. Some parents were upset that the Housing Officer did not take into account personal or family circumstances when allocating housing. Participants felt that they could not live in certain areas due to relationship breakdowns or family problems and found that they received little sympathy or understanding from the County Council,

"The County Council were giving me one house since I put in for the transfer but they were giving me a location…where too many enemies to my own family is in it." (Paula)

Galway City Partnership

A few of the participants had been involved with Galway City Partnership. The parents described the staff as helpful and approachable. Some participants were grateful to staff who had helped them to access other services. Participants found the courses that the Partnership provided very realistic and practical. Others described how they found that the staff wanted to actively involve parents in courses. Other parents found that the grants the Partnership provided enabled them to return to and remain in education:

"When I was looking for childcare…they were fantastic. They rang everyone up for me…They helped me get the childcare." (Cathy)

Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)

A few of the participants had attended courses in GMIT. They found the staff helpful and informative. In some cases the staff helped parents to access grants they were unaware of. Some of the participants highlighted that teaching staff were very understanding about the fact that they were parenting alone and helped them in any way they could:

"The staff at GMIT made allowances for the fact that I had a son … they were very understanding of that, or if my son was sick, you know, like all I had to do was … ring in and explain and they were fine about that and, you know, they'd help you get up to date with the notes and things like that and handouts so you could go through something that you may have missed." (Úna)

Local Family Resource Centre

Only four participants had accessed their local Family Resource Centre. The parents found the staff to very helpful and assisted them in accessing entitlements or benefits. Participants highlighted the alternative services that they could avail of like counselling, massage or reflexology which were all free of charge. Participants found that this helped them to de-stress and cope better with parenting alone. Some of the Centres also provided activities for children that were free of charge or subsidised.

NUI Galway

Some of the participants were attending courses in NUI Galway. Many parents found the University very helpful when they were looking for information about returning to education. The Mature Student's Officer was highlighted by nearly all the parents as someone who was very approachable, supportive and encouraging. Counselling services are provided free of charge to all students by the Student Support Services. Parents described how the Student Support Services helped them through difficult emotional periods. The participants also identified teaching staff as being flexible and understanding to their personal situation. Many of

the participants told how lecturers would often grant extensions for course work if family matters had interfered with the parents study time.

The Department of Social and Family Affairs

Some of the participants acknowledged that they found the staff at the DSFA very supportive, informative and friendly. Many of the parents highlighted that the staff and services at the DSFA had improved significantly over the last few years:

"I always find them friendly if anything comes up I always find them relaxed and what have you." (Des)

"The staff seem nicer it could be me, I don't know. They seem more professional or thorough or something. Maybe it is just better run." (Faye)

Numerous parents highlighted difficulties that they had in dealing with the DSFA. There was an assumption by many of the parents that the DSFA would have information regarding other entitlements and services, such as what to do when returning to education, and when this wasn't the case parents quite often became very frustrated. Other parents were critical of the fact that the DSFA did not give them clear instructions when they were applying for claims. This was time consuming and frustrating for both the parent and the DSFA:

"The DSFA … seem to think that as a lone parent you've nothing else to do but kind of run around and you know fill in forms and get things stamped for them … if you're in one office and they send you to get something else they should tell you where else you need to go because oftentimes you go back up to them and they say 'Well you need to go and get this now as well'. You know, there seems to be no kind of checklist of everything you need." (Anne)

The majority of the parents had been upset by their initial visit from the DSFA that is needed to claim the One Parent Family Payment (OPFP). Many described the manner of the DSFA official as aggressive and intrusive. As one participant explained the Official who came to her home asked "Can I go up and check you wardrobes?" However, the participants did acknowledge that the DSFA had to be thorough in their investigations but they still felt that the attitude of the staff could be improved:

"She was a very stern lady…and she was sort of 'But you're pregnant' and it's 'Who's the father of this child then?'…it was kinda tough and she grilled everything and you had to show everything, bank statements and just I found it kind of, it was quite intimidating. I felt like she was trying to see was I lying. You know? But I suppose it's a lot of money you know … to scam … I suppose they have to be on the lookout for the scam … it was just the woman herself." (Jade)

Another parent was upset at the DSFA's continuous investigation in to her personal circumstances and felt that their manner was quite intimidating:

"I keep getting letters from the DSFA … saying that if I didn't give the name of the father then they'd stop my payments… Threatening letters … the same letters were coming three or four times … because I was an emotional wreck I couldn't do it, Mum rang the Sligo office and gave out to them. You know because every letter I'd get I'd get really upset." (Lisa)

Some of the participants were critical of the time it took for their claims to be processed. It was a stressful time for parents as they had little if any money to live on. Many participants were frustrated with the fact that they never got to deal with the same member of staff at the DSFA. This resulted in parents having to repeat their query and they also felt that there were variations in the responses. One parent, who wanted to apply for the Back to Education Allowance, was told by one member of staff to fill in the form but when she brought back the form she was told by another staff member that it was too early to apply. A number of parents felt that they were not listened to properly by DSFA staff. Some parents were critical of the difficulties they had in trying to contact the DSFA. A number of parents highlighted the expense involved in phoning the DSFA:

"I think even just phoning the DSFA and trying to get what you want I do find it difficult or … I know it might sound stupid but yet you're on welfare and you're meant to have no money but it could take you 15, 20 minutes on the phone, paying the phone bill for that to get through. D'you know? Little things like that. " (Cathy)

The majority of the participants highlighted the fact that the DSFA was not forthcoming with information, that parents had to be aware of their entitlements in order to receive them. The impact of this lack of information can often mean that individuals are not aware of what their entitlements are and are very often dependent on DSFA staff to explain to them what benefits they might be entitled to apply for. Participants also pointed out that as the DSFA is not proactive in allocating claims, parents need to have the self-belief to pursue their entitlements. This can be quite stressful for parents especially after a relationship breakdown:

"I didn't know where to look or what to do … I had no idea … that I could get money because … I was married … I thought when you say 'lone parent families' to me that's people that aren't married…I found it out myself … No one told me I was entitled to a medical card…It was on one of the forms the DSFA man gave me to fill in … I said 'Am I entitled to this?' He said 'Oh yeah but you'll have to fill out a form' … And then I was reading the form for the school bus … I'd seen then if you had a medical card you were entitled to free bus travel. So I sent them off my number and I got it." (Ursula)

Many of the participants acknowledged that their experience with the DSFA depended on the attitude of the individual staff member whom they were dealing with:

"Sometimes you can ring the DSFA and get someone that's just, can't be bothered, you know, very short with you when you're trying to explain something to them, and that, and then, another day you might ring, and get someone totally different, very obliging, very helpful." (Rebecca)

A number of the participants felt that staff could interact more positively with them. This would make engaging with the DSFA less stressful and intimidating and counteract experiences of some parents who described the staff dealing with them as rude, impolite or discourteous. Some suggested that if staff were more sensitive to the difficulties some parents have in adjusting to parenting alone then their dealings with the DSFA would improve:

"I didn't like going to the office … I always felt that the people behind the counter were really rude … I just always felt bad. Maybe it was partly to do with myself. I felt bad about myself being in there. I didn't like it. And it kind of made me angry as well because I thought … they're talking to me as if I'm completely stupid, which I didn't like." (Emer)

The DSFA's policy restrictions were highlighted by many participants as a significant barrier to returning to and remaining in employment and education. Some parents felt that the income threshold was too low and forces them to remain in a poverty trap:

"When I was working, if you earned over £60 a week they would take half the money you'd get … So if you earned £61 instead of them saying 'Well, hey, I'll take 50p off that pound you're ahead extra.' They take a serious amount of money off you … You were caught in this poverty trap because they would not allow you earn enough to make a difference to the way you were living. You know, as soon as you made a difference they would penalise you hugely. It was designed to keep you in dire straights." (Geraldine)

Another parent made the point that it seemed that the income threshold was not increased in line with increases in the minimum wage. Some of parents felt that if the income threshold was increased more parents would be encouraged to work:

"I would query as well when the minimum wage went up why didn't the little allowance that we're allowed to earn … I suppose if they didn't take it off you there'd be far more people that would be able to get out and go to work. I just don't see the point of going out for €50 a week." (Brigid)

Parents described how difficulties could arise with their payments if they were involved in periodic or casual work. This was mainly to do with the fact that they would have to reapply to get their full benefit which would mean a delay in benefit payments. Other participants were critical of the fact that they could not receive certain benefits as they had not been in receipt of the OPFP for the required amount of time. One participant owes €500 in heating costs to the ESB and was threatened with disconnection but she does not qualify for fuel allowance. As she explains:

"I was trying to ask the DSFA for fuel supplement as well but they were saying that they have to be for twelve months on the One Parent that I could get that. And I was 'I don't want to stay that long on Social, I am going crazy in home' (Mkweli)

Some were annoyed that maintenance payments stopped once the child completed education and also the fact that maintenance is not linked to inflation.

Some participants were critical of the fact that the DSFA would insist that they try to get maintenance from their children's other parent. Many parents felt that this was an emotional strain on them and their children especially when it involved judicial proceedings:

"So I had to go to court to prove to the Social Welfare that I wasn't getting any maintenance...it was like he [children's other parent] was rinsing out his dirty linen in front of everybody...So it was very, very bad...he was bringing the kids to court...So the kids were totally screwed in the head after." (Kelly)

The majority of participants were critical of many issues surrounding the Rent Supplement. Whilst this scheme is administered by the CWOs at the HSE it is funded by the DSFA. Some participants were critical of the rules and regulations surrounding the Rent Supplement Scheme. Many felt that the amount given was unrealistic for Galway's private rented market:

"Social Welfare gives you €750 a month for a two bedroom apartment or a two bedroom house. I can't get it any more because I've only one child … anywhere you ring as well is €800 a month … there was only one place I seen in the paper for €750 a month and that was a one bedroom apartment. And I would live in a one bedroom apartment, it wouldn't bother me. The only thing is it'd do me now while he's in the co t...But when he's in the bed... I'd need a two bedroom place or whatever." (Barbara)

Many parents admitted that they were using their own money along with the Rent Supplement in order to meet their rent. This practice is not allowed by the Rent Supplement criteria but the parents felt that they had no other choice. Hannah pays €250 a month to her landlord on top of her Rent Supplement and she then has €80 to spend each week on herself and her two children. Parents also highlighted that they relied on their landlord to say that they are charging the Rent Supplement amount and then accept the extra money.

Several participants found it very difficult to find a landlord that would accept Rent Supplement. Other parents were critical of the fact that if their rent was increased they had no option other than to find another place to live as their Rent Supplement would not be increased in line with rising rent prices. Some of the participants were frustrated as the whole process of finding accommodation and accessing Rent Supplement was not co-ordinated. If parents were able to receive the money for a deposit on the same day that the accommodation list was published it would be easier for them to secure a place to live. A couple of participants were annoyed with the fact that certain circumstances prevented them from being eligible for Rent Supplement.

Vocational Education Committee

Some participants had been involved with the VEC. The participants acknowledged that VEC staff was helpful, encouraging and supportive. For some the courses enable participants to pursue further studies:

"I did a course with the VEC and from that course I'm now doing my degree …I really enjoyed their course I really did…it was a business course that's how I started with business through these people." (Des)"

While many of the participants found the VEC childcare grant helpful, others found the amount unrealistic for childcare prices in Galway. Other parents found that the childcare grant could only be used for registered childminders. Only one participant had been involved with Youthreach and she found the staff helpful, encouraging and flexible.

Young Mothers in Education

Only a few of the participants had been involved with the Young Mothers in Education group. Overall their experience had been very positive. Parents found the staff helpful and supportive. Participants found that staff working there was very encouraging, helping them with a number of difficulties such as accessing courses and filling out application forms. Young Mothers in Education can provide parents with grants which the participants highlighted eased their financial pressure when they returned to education. Other parents were able to take part in courses provided by Young Mothers in Education as childcare was provided free of charge.

Other Organisations

There was only one participant who gave an interview who had engaged with Cumas Teo. She was able to access grants which alleviated her financial situation. One participant had dealt with Údarás na Gaeltachta and found them to be very helpful, very understanding and approachable and gave her a grant for her business. Only one participant had been involved with Galway Rural Development and she found them "very helpful."

A few of the parents had accessed their local Community Development Project. They enabled parents to engage in activities such as yoga and reflexology. They also ran projects that enabled neighbours to interact with each other which one participant found helpful. One parent pointed out that she found it difficult to access their services at certain times. Some of the parents had used the Citizen's Information Centre to access information on their rights and entitlements. Others found the staff approachable and knew that that their confidentiality was protected. One parent used Refuge and found them very good and she also highlighted that they do not just help victims of domestic violence.

Parents highlighted that schools could provide their children with easily accessible forms of help and support. Two participants identified the local Youth Project as being helpful and supportive to their children. One parent accessed Muintereas and found them very supportive. One participant was involved with the Respond Housing Agency which helped her to be re-housed as she felt unsafe in her housing estate. The One World Centre provided one participant with helpful advice and support. The Friendship Club was described by one parent as helpful to her children. A few parents received financial help from the St. Vincent De Paul and found them to be friendly and helpful.

Some of the participants had been involved with the Teen Parent Initiative. Most of these parents acknowledged them as a great source of support. Anne described how she feels that they are a continuous form of support to her: "it's like an open door policy with them. You can always go back into them and they're always really welcoming and stuff." Other parents found that they provided great support when they first became parents. Participants highlighted the social aspect of being involved in the Teen Parent Initiative. It enabled them to meet other young people who were parenting alone.

6.3 Difficulties parents have experienced with organisations

Participants highlighted many difficulties they had with different organisations. During the interviews many parents admitted that they had never heard of a lot of the organisations. Several of the participants admitted that they were only able to access services after receiving information from their friends or family. Parents argued that organisations were not proactive in providing their services. Without this informal network many would have not received extra benefits or attended courses. A frequent comment from participants was that they had no idea who to approach in order to receive information:

"I find it so hard to find … information on how do I start, you know baby step out of this or you know that kind of thing …I would love to start work … even college … it's hard to find someone to tell you the right information … That's the hugest thing … I want to know where to go…'cause I'd be right there tomorrow morning" (Kate)

Nearly all of the participants highlighted the fact that it was extremely difficult to find out what benefits they are entitled to or what their options were in relation to returning to work or education. Many parents found that benefit processes were not explained to them which made it difficult for them to understand why their entitlements were being reduced. The participants felt that organisations should improve their structures so that it would be easier for people to find this information:

"There's nothing about your entitlements as regards education or courses or what are your options open to you as regards going back to work, what you'd be entitled to if you go back to work. You're just left to find that all out on your own." (Isabel)

Other parents argued that organisations should be more proactive in providing their services as this would help people to engage with them. Participants also argued that organisations should work together and should be aware of each others services so that parents could receive the assistance that is most suitable to them:

"If somebody like a … liaison officer came to me and said 'Well, right, look it, you can do all these things and we'll help you' … but nobody knocked on the door … and said 'What do you want to do? or 'Do you want to get back into the workforce … we'll help you." (Elaine)

Participants felt that organisations could advertise themselves a lot more so that people would be aware of where to go and how to access their entitlements or options for the future:

"Maybe it was the people I was dealing with didn't tell me what was out there …I think maybe if there was a notice up in the doctor's office or something, or if there was some type of pamphlet you could get that tells you of the support out there … you know when you go in and talk to the people in the Social Welfare Office they give you a pack and say 'Look it, why don't you read this? There could be something in it that could suit you." (Ursula)

Many of the participants who were living in rural areas were critical of the fact that they did not have any locally based services. This often meant that they had to travel to receive certain services or in some cases could not avail of these services. A lack of personal or public transport could also prevent parents from accessing services and was a factor which impacted most upon those living in rural areas. This could include even basic services like a local shop which for one parent was over three miles away:

"There's no centre for childcare … there's no crèche. There's no drop in centres, there's no place you can go and look for information. There isn't even a CWO here. There's no health centre. " (Leanne)

6.4 Summary

These interviews reveal a number of important points regarding the experiences of those parenting alone when engaging with service providers:

• Despite the numerous organisations providing services which can be accessed by those parenting alone, the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA), the Community Welfare Officers (CWOs), FÁS, and the City and County Councils are the organisations which they interact with most frequently;

• Many parents spoke about having positive experiences with the CWOs, ranging from supplementary supports and benefits to financial advice;

- However, many parents also spoke of negative experiences with CWOs. Such experiences were characterised by poor personal relations, a lack of sensitivity about the needs of individual parents, and an unwillingness on behalf of some CWOs to be forthcoming about benefits and available supports;

- Many of the parents who engaged with FÁS spoke positively about their experiences, particularly those on the Community Employment (CE) scheme. The dedicated one-to-one approach of staff in the organisation, and the differentiated level of courses, served to enhance their experience, enabled them to progress at their own pace and provided a social outlet for them;

- However, some parents were frustrated with FÁS's lack of awareness regarding their personal circumstances, particularly in relation to availability to take up employment if offered;

- Although the DSFA was cited as a supportive and informative organisation in some regards, the majority of parents were dissatisfied with their initial experience of staff when applying for the One Parent Family Payment. Parents spoke of some staff as being unpleasant and intimidating and unacceptable delays in the processing of claims. A lack of information when applying for claims was also cited as problematic when engaging with the organisation, as was the inability of the organisation to allocate staff to specific parents;

- The regulations governing benefits financed by the DSFA were identified as complex and confusing. In particular, the threshold levels linked to benefits, and the impact of periodic work upon benefits, served to confuse many and ultimately discourage them from taking up training, education or employment opportunities. The threshold levels of the rental supplement scheme were deemed to be inappropriate to local market conditions;

- The City and County Councils, as housing authorities, play a significant role in the lives of many of the participants. While both councils were cited as engaging positively with them, there were a number of instances where experiences were negative. Such experiences centred specifically on an unwillingness on behalf of some staff to provide information to parents, and more generally on a lack of professionalism in dealing with parents;

- The participants interacted with a variety of other organisations in the state and voluntary sector, including third-level education providers, family resource centres, local education projects, community development projects, rural development companies, housing organisations and the St. Vincent de Paul. The experiences of the parents who engaged with these organisations were positive. Such organisations provided a range of supports, from information and social support to financial assistance and business grants;

- Parents identified a number of difficulties common to all organisations providing services which they can avail of, either statutory or voluntary. Chief amongst these was an acute lack of awareness about the organisation – many simply had never heard of the organisation mentioned to them while others were unsure or unaware about what they did. Others, particularly in rural areas, identified an acute lack of service provision generally as being a significant factor in their daily lives. Others again identified the potential usefulness of organisations working together to provide an informal referral service for parents.

6.5 Conclusion

Parents found dealing with organisations quite difficult, primarily because some organisations are not forthcoming with information about entitlements and services. It appears that the onus is on the individual to find out about what is available to them. The rules and regulations surrounding services and entitlements are regarded as far from straight forward. Some participants spoke of having a positive experience when dealing with service providers in the statutory arena. However the majority recounted difficulties in dealing with them. These difficulties come under three main categories: experiences with personnel of the service provider: experiences of visiting the service provider offices: and a lack of efficiency and consistency in

the application of rules and regulations governing benefits and allowances by service providers. Quite often one bad experience with one representative of an organisation can leave a lasting impact on the respondents and can often make them reluctant to return to that organisation for information.

Chapter Seven

The Views of National Policy Actors and Local Service Providers on Social Exclusion and the Labour Market Needs of those Parenting Alone

7.1 Introduction

This section of the report will address issues arising out of a series of interviews undertaken with policy actors at both the national and local level. In all, 23 interviews were conducted involving 29 actors covering a range of national and local statutory and voluntary agencies involved in formulating policies or who provide services for those parenting alone. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, with participants being sent out a list of questions for consideration prior to the interview. The interviews were conducted over a period of four months from March to June 2007 inclusive. The research team was interested in getting the views of key policy actors so as to ascertain the degree to which the proposals, as they currently stand, would form the basis of future policies reflected in legislative and benefit change. We were also interested in the current position and organisational capacity of service providers to implement such changes.

More specifically, we asked policy actors at the national level about the influences of the proposals, their evolution and current standing, and the envisaged implementation process given that the proposals have not been converted into legislation just yet. The amount of learning which can take place between countries when formulating and implementing new policies is significant, and can reveal much about the mindset of government officials. We were also interested in identifying the level of consultation which took place between government departments and state agencies, representative groups and social partners at the national level. A high degree of consultation and agreement can assist in the identification of problems with proposals, allow for the accommodation of different views, and potentially address fears and reservations highlighted about the proposals.

At the local level actors of both statutory and voluntary organisations were asked to describe their organisation and how they work for those who parent alone before proceeding to identify what they felt were the most important issues facing those who parent alone in Galway City and County... It was important to reveal the level of understanding of issues facing those who parent alone so as to get a fuller picture of the life of one who parents alone as seen by those who work with and for them. It also served the purpose of identifying problems experienced by those who parent alone which may impact upon the envisaged implementation of the policy proposals. In particular, the identification of barriers and challenges for those entering the labour market was an important focus for the interviews.

Actors were also asked about their organisational capacity to implement these proposals if so required and the level of collaboration on the ground between organisations, and the amount of inter-linkage between them. Again this was important so as to identify existing problems and potential pitfalls in implementing the proposals in the local area. Both national and local actors were asked to identify what they perceived to be the impact of the proposals on children and parents. It was important for all actors to be given an opportunity to raise concerns and identify possible pitfalls if the proposals are implemented as currently set out. All respondents were also free to address any issues or areas that the research team failed to highlight.

What follows is the distillation of actors' views and responses to questions covering the themes outlined above in the context of the policy proposals as they stand. This chapter should neither be read as being the views of the research team, nor merely a summary of selected themes highlighted by actors. What is presented below is the findings of these interviews and (combined with the results of the questionnaires and the interviews with those who parent alone) form the basis for the discussion chapter which follows in the report.

7.2 The impetus and origins of the 'Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents'

The research team wished to inquire into the impetus for the set of proposals for a number of reasons. Aware that significant change to the welfare state was already mooted in the NESC document *The Developmental Welfare State* (2005) the team wished to ascertain the degree to which this was an influence on the development of the proposals. However, we also wished to find out why those in receipt of the OPFP were specifically targeted – what was the rationale underpinning the proposals – financial, economic or other. In addition we were interested in revealing the extent to which Irish officials examined developments in other countries and the amount of learning that occurred when examining such developments.

Several impetuses are identified in interviews for the development of the proposals. As already indicated, earlier proposals were shelved due to constraints around the ability of the state to implement them successfully. However, by 2005 a different situation had developed whereby international and domestic forces had influenced further thinking around the issue of labour market activation of those parenting alone in receipt of the OPFP. The initial impetus for this set of proposals was derived from a number of sources. The Social Partnership agreement *Sustaining Progress* and its commitment to reduce rates of child poverty, and the subsequent work by DSFA and in particular the Social Inclusion Unit, significantly influenced the development of these proposals.

A large number of officials interviewed were critically aware of the vulnerability of those parenting alone and their children to poverty, and the failure of the economy to address their situation. The advocated route out of poverty by the state is employment and so the proposals were very much framed with this in mind. Indeed the low tax-low welfare regime operated by the Irish state was viewed by some officials as a factor in persuading welfare dependents into employment or training programmes. Those parenting alone were identified as being the most vulnerable group and therefore were targeted first. One official commented that those parenting alone have a responsibility to engage in training and education so as to equip themselves for the labour market.

There was also a certain amount of fiscal consideration, and in particular the costs associated with the OPFP, relating to the proposals' development. One official spoke of the desire on behalf of the Department of Finance (DofF) for officials to "get into this space collectively," to develop proposals which would ultimately address the poverty levels of those who parent alone with a view to ultimately reducing the amount spent by the exchequer on the payment. Officials identified that outcomes for those in receipt of the OPFP were not what they should be, a fact identified by both social partner groups and representative bodies, both of whom highlighted high levels of poverty amongst recipients when compared to the national average. Officials also expressed a certain degree of dissatisfaction regarding the efficacy of current expenditure on the OPFP. In calculating costs associated with reform of the payment the DofF became increasingly involved in framing the proposals, being aware of the expense and the desire to improve outcomes for those parenting alone:

> "It's also felt that the money that's paid on lone parents is money down the drain. The climate of dependency that's engendered with them is not good either for the economy, or the exchequer, or indeed themselves."

There is some disagreement regarding the degree to which this is a cost – cutting exercise, with representative groups viewing it as such while other respondents both within the civil service and elsewhere seeing it as being linked to enabling employment so as to lift one parent families out of poverty. However, there was more agreement on the potential of the policy in moving people off welfare and into work, as one official commented:

> "So it was financial independence from the welfare state and financial independence in their own households, that if they co-habit with someone we didn't make this assumption that they were being supported."

Yet it was also felt that there were certain economic considerations in developing these proposals. While the number of females in the labour force had increased steadily, one official commented that it could "always do with more improvement." The ineffectiveness of existing programmes in progressing participants towards employment was cited as another influential factor, both by governmental and non-governmental actors. In particular, the community employment (CE) scheme, while useful, failed to progress those parenting alone, instead serving as something which merely occupies their time. While it is a programme which ticks all the boxes regarding flexibility, childcare, and impact on benefits, it is not effective as a labour market programme in its own right. Furthermore, if a participant desired to move from CE to the labour market, they suddenly become susceptible to withdrawal of benefit, childcare pressures, inflexible or unsuitable employment or training schedules. Representative bodies indicated the poor level of engagement on the ground, particularly in FÁS offices, regarding employment advancement and progression, and indicated the need to overcome this (amongst other factors, most notably childcare) in attempting to implement these proposals. In this regard it is also important to highlight that officials recognise that for the proposals to work as planned,

the initial financial outlay will be far greater than current expenditure, but that benefits will accrue for those individuals targeted, the state, and wider society in the long run.

Officials drew on a number of influences in drawing up the proposals. Initially they were cognisant of the NESC document The *Developmental Welfare State* and the broad thrust of its proposals, but they also drew on influences and experiences in other countries. In particular, developments in Denmark and the United Kingdom were cited as being strong influences, particularly the former and the NESC's admiration for its welfare regime. The OECD report, *Babies and Bosses* was also highlighted as being influential on the most recent proposals, as were the experiences of other countries that have higher rates of employment amongst the target group than Ireland.   Other factors closer to home were also important in prompting officials to consider the current policy regarding those who parent alone. On a pragmatic level, officials commented that DSFA knows very little about those parenting alone once they enter the system as a recipient of the payment, nor is much known about what is available for them locally should they want to engage with training or employment opportunities.

7.3 Consultation and the development of policy proposals

The research team was interested in the degree of consultation around the development of the proposals. In particular we wanted to examine the level of consultation between officials and groups representing those who parent alone in the formulation of proposals which could have the potential to drastically change their lives in so many ways. Of concern to the team also was the position of an actual person parenting alone and in receipt of the OPFP in the formulation process. We wanted to ascertain the degree to which the thoughts, issues and needs of those parenting alone were heard and given weight during the development of the proposals.

Attempts to address the issue of those parenting alone and labour market activation were initially made in 2000 but were shelved as a result of underdeveloped implementation infrastructure and an unprepared public. This time around, non-governmental actors identified the process surrounding the development of these proposals as being relatively closed and one-way. While there is evidence to suggest that representative groups were consulted prior to the publication of the proposals, the extent of consultation during the development of the proposals is somewhat contested.

The proposals emerged out of a process which began in spring 2005 with general discussions on addressing the issue of labour market activation for those parenting alone. The DoFF had some reservations about the over optimistic costing put forward by the DSFA which prolonged the discussion stage within the civil service and prevented the possibility of the welfare aspect of the proposals being included in Budget 2006. Continuous dialogue and the exchange of views on the proposals appear to have occurred within the civil service alone, and did not include wider government agencies such as the Family Support Agency (FSA) or the Combat Poverty Agency. One governmental body actor identified the consultation and development process around the formulation of the proposals as being hierarchical and civil service-dominated. The respondent attempted to secure an oral submission on the proposals in the summer of 2005 but had the appointment postponed three times before it was cancelled, thus the submission went the way of all others, i.e. written.

Officials interviewed for this research identified that, although such issues would usually be mediated through the social partnership process, because of the absence at the time of representative groups from that process, an alternative mechanism was constructed whereby members of the Senior Officials Group on Social Inclusion (SOGSI) engaged with representative groups on certain issues pertaining to the development of the proposals. Notwithstanding this, some representative groups identified a genuine willingness on behalf of particular officials within departments to address the needs of those parenting alone in a positive manner, and tentatively welcomed the proposals once published, dependent on full implementation as outlined. However, other representative groups characterised the relationship with government as being largely one–way, with very little dialogue or feedback regarding the impact of suggestions made in submissions, or subsequent concerns regarding the proposals. As one respondent put it, "there's few opportunities to engage … to get a sort of back-and-forth going."

The issue of consultation is interesting in that there was a degree of uncertainty amongst officials regarding the level of consultation. Whilst some were unsure about the nature of consultation with representative groups, others were more assured that such consultation took place, both before and after the publication of the proposals. The DFSA undertook consultation prior to publication with the representative groups, and with government departments through SOGSI and the Tripartite Group on Activation. Post publication of the proposals, a roundtable discussion was held in Farmleigh attended by all groups and other interested parties such as TDs, government ministers, and voluntary and community groups (unspecified). Another official and member of SOGSI indicated that a number of meetings were held around the country afterwards. All officials interviewed expressed relative surprise at the high level of acceptance from the representative groups of the proposals, although there were some differing opinions regarding the degree of engagement with those parenting alone. While one official claimed that the DSFA consulted with those parenting alone directly, with "the grassroots," another in the DSFA indicated that they relied on the representative groups themselves to consult and relay the opinions of single parents to the department and SOGSI. It was acknowledged that this was largely due to the possibility of non-response if the department contacted those in receipt of the OPFP directly.

Most notable, however, is the role of a number of inter-departmental groups, especially the SOGSI, in moving the process towards publication of proposals. This group is still in existence and appears to play a role in moving these proposals towards implementation. However, according to one representative group actor who sought a meeting with SOGSI in autumn 2006, the proposals had not been advanced that much and was under the impression after the meeting that the group was 'treading water'. Another representative group actor identified a desire to be part of the implementation group but was not permitted to be so. Notably, one government agency actor and a representative group actor both expressed concern at the apparent absence of those parenting alone from the process, and the largely middle-class perspective from which this issue is being viewed:

> "We'd a high level group with no lone parent involved. And I'm not talking about lone parent organisations. I'm talking about a real, live, lone parent in the middle of it, saying "I'm living here in St. Michael's estate in Inchicore, there's drugs all over the place, I can't get my kids to school." You know? This is what you want to be hearing. …. If you get it right for that you get it right for the rest."

In relation to this, one member of SOGSI identified the danger of sometimes relying on umbrella organisations to provide feedback to constituent members, and the potential disjoint which can occur at that juncture:

> "from bitter experience we know that because umbrella groups are favourable to the contents of a change in a document doesn't necessarily mean that the people that they claim to represent - but of course don't really represent or at least not automatically – the people who are on the ground, the punters, when it eventually reaches their pockets … at that stage people wake up and of course it's a bit late for them at that stage."

7.4 Concerns about the policy proposals at the National Level

Actors were asked whether they had any concerns about the policy proposals as outlined in the document. The envisaged compulsory nature of the proposals was the main focus of respondents' concerns during interviews. Officials were questioned regarding the possible discretionary aspect and as to whether there would be an opt-out clause for those in receipt of the OPFP who, for any number of reasons, would not be able to engage fully in programme as envisaged by the state. Officials responded that in general, there was no envisaged clause or discretion built into the implementation of the programme at this stage, and provided different justifications for this, ranging from the complexity of the welfare code and the tendency for what seems to be a minor alteration having ripple effects, through there simply being no discretion, to the inappropriate application of the payment if parents are also carers, or are disabled, temporarily or otherwise. However, all officials were acutely aware that the successful implementation of the proposals will require a significant degree of coordination across government departments that "the three legged stool" of childcare, education and training, and income reform, will all need to be in situ for the proposals to get off the ground. Thus if they could get it right for those parenting alone, viewed as the most vulnerable of groups, then they could apply similar mechanisms to other vulnerable, disengaged groups.

Officials were also aware of the political sensitivity of such proposals, recalling the entry of one prominent politician into the debate regarding those parenting alone in 1997 and the impact it caused. However, officials also commented on the willingness of the then Minister at the DSFA, Seamus Brennan, to press ahead with proposals characterised as being positive for those parenting alone, and their families. This emphasis on publicising the positives of the proposals was stressed by some officials who highlighted fears raised by some social partners regarding compulsion and the difficulty this may cause on the ground in selling the proposals.

Two social partner organisations interviewed identified dangers in pushing those parenting alone into employment, particularly if they have other considerations and that from an employer point of view it may be more beneficial for all if the individual was willing and ready to enter the labour market. Another actor identified a number of contingencies which may cause further stress to the parent if the proposals are compulsory for all. Such exceptions included families with multiple births, children with special needs, mental health difficulties, and personal problems of the parent including alcoholism or other health problems. In responding to a question on the nature of activation, one actor indicated the potential for volunteerism as another form of activation which may serve a greater purpose for society. Furthermore, in light of such considerations, another social partner organisation highlighted the importance of a balance between work life and home life, particularly for those who parent alone.

Governmental agency actors identified the potential for the proposals to actually increase child poverty through the absence of parents in the home and the knock-on effect on children and their education. The fear that when implemented, these proposals will be guided by a 'no-going back' ethos resonated amongst many respondents. If a person parenting alone engages with the envisaged implementation process, and then decides to exit a training scheme, educational course, or job for whatever reason, and ends up on unemployment benefit or assistance, was highlighted by representative groups as unacceptable and further endangering both parents and children. The potential of such an occurrence to worsen child poverty and increase demand for other state services were identified as possible negative effects. Ultimately however, the fear of limited implementation, where an essential minimum is in place to enable the rolling-out of the proposals, was a chief concern:

> "the idea that … you're meant to work 19 hours et cetera is dependent on a whole lot of stools being in place – locally accessible jobs, locally accessible part-time jobs, the availability of affordable childcare. We would have concerns that a lot of the mechanisms aren't there to support the proposals at the moment."

A number of issues were raised by actors when asked to consider the impact of the proposals on both children and the act of parenting. These issues included positives such as the reduction of child poverty, a parent working as being a positive role model for children and enhanced self-esteem for the parent themselves. However a number of further concerns specific to this heading were also identified. These included the potential for those targeted by these proposals to be pushed into any type of employment, the potential negative impact on children when activation takes place, particularly regarding their psychological well-being. Other concerns about the proposals focused on the potential for successful implementation to be thwarted by a failure to provide adequate childcare and other services essential to the lives of those parenting alone.

Participants raised a number of issues regarding the impact of the proposals on the act of parenting and the relationship between parent and child. Several respondents highlighted the initial rationale for the proposals being the need to redress the levels of poverty experienced by children in households in receipt of the OPFP, and the potential for the proposals, if implemented, to reduce such levels, and the frequency of welfare dependency:

> "It'll improve the incomes of these families and their living conditions and … to try and stop the kind of intergenerational, cause there's a certain level of welfare dependency that isn't good, for children to grow up in that environment."

In this regard the proposals were viewed as a positive development in the arenas of welfare and family policy. In particular, the development of parents as good role models was identified as a potential benefit, as was the focus on improving outcomes for both parent and children. This idea of an improved role model was reflected in the comments of members of the SOGSI and representatives of interest groups acting in the interests of one-parent families:

"Purely from a sociological point of view that seeing hopefully both parents working constructively, remuneratively in the workforce is a better role model than not."

In enhancing the self-esteem of those who parent alone respondents felt that the impact would have a trickle-down effect on the rest of the family, and in turn would enhance the parenting role of targeted recipients of the payment. The possibility of families having more money through entering the labour market was identified as having a number of further effects: a reduction in the stress levels of those parenting alone as a result of financial worries; the enablement of children to engage in more activities which may have been previously out of financial reach; counteracting the stereotyping of those parenting alone in society; and making the family unit generally more happy. Yet such benefits are perceived to only come about if other aspects of the activation process are in place. As one representative organisation actor remarked:

"My boss has a picture of Vicky Pollard up on the door of her office to remind her of the fact that that's what most people think of when they think of a lone parent. They don't think of people with capacity, with energy, with motivation, with willingness, with something to contribute … If you follow through the logic of what the proposals say and you do recognise it and you do reflect those things in your guidelines … it could have quite a good effect 'cause you take that extreme poverty out of the scenario, that's a removal of a very significant degree of stress from your life. One of things you'll hear from lone parents is the continual guilt and chip on their shoulder about not being able to give their kids access to the same thing as everybody else gets so being able to do that for their kids, that's a positive thing."

However, some respondents felt that the type of employment was crucial to reducing stress levels within the home and thereby increasing the positive impact of the proposals. Respondents' knowledge of research in other jurisdictions identified that the impact of returning to work was very much dependent on the type of employment engaged in. Work of a reasonable and stable quality is perceived to correlate with greater self-esteem, confidence and overall result in a more positive situation. Whereas a low-paid, potentially part-time job engaged in as a result of being obliged to uptake some employment can add to an already stressful situation, and equally trap parents through the fear of losing benefits if they choose to give up such work. Numerous respondents thus felt the need to have a menu of options in place so as to counteract any feeling of a 'one-size-fits-all' solution. Such a response would reduce the sense of obligation and resulting stress which may accompany implementation of the proposals and serve to genuinely enhance the chances of both parents and children. As one social partner actor pointed out:

"If there's a whole range of things available to them, not just a job, there's education, there's training, there's apprenticeships, there's night-courses. You know, there has to be a range of options there before we can enter a situation where a lone parent is forced to take up a job."

Officials identified a limited negative impact on parenting, instead viewing the proposals as being broadly positive. Indeed one departmental respondent identified the need to shift away from some sentimental notions about parenting, which while absolutely legitimate and valid, tend to result in poor outcomes for both parent and children, specifically in relation to poverty levels, and better results for society as a whole:

"A major determinant of people's life chances is the level of parental education, maternal education. The biggest single influence on a child's subsequent life is the level of the mother's education and educational experience. It seems to me that at a minimum, even if no one was to go into employment, if people could go into education we'd be doing people, individuals and society a service … I think it's very hard to argue against that."

Subsequent interviews with other officials reflected broad agreement with the above statement, but added that the financial impact of the new proposals would enhance the lives of all concerned and this would have a subsequent knock-on effect on the lives of children. One civil servant highlighted the example of many two-parent families having children in schools and crèches and felt that the situation of a single parent was not dissimilar to the former. To expect a single parent to enter employment during school hours would not have a detrimental effect on the family. However, the impact on child development was one of central criticisms of the proposals and related strongly to the proposed ages of the youngest children in the household when the

single parent is activated. Those working in the area do not view the proposals as providing choice for those who care, particularly at a crucial time in a child's life:

"I just think that seven to twelve, I think it's a really important phase in life and there's a huge amount of learning in that phase … a huge amount of support and a huge amount of emotional stuff going on 'cause, you know, their bodies are starting to change, there's a lot of stuff starting to happen, there's a lot of peer pressure, and yeah, I would be concerned about the seven."

All respondents gave at the minimum a guarded welcome to the proposals but differed on the detail of implementation and the minimum amount of requisites needed for the proposals to achieve their aims. The idea of improved quality of life being related to financial benefits alone was dismissed by many respondents as being unrealistic, with one prominent social partner organisation identifying a number of 'existence issues' related to improved quality of life for parent and children. Such issues included availability and accessibility of schools in some areas and the provision of housing adequately located to access a wider range of services. National representative groups identified wider structural issues such as health and child development as being equally significant:

"We're very much making the point that its quality of life that has to be improved and that's influenced by a whole load of things, not just employment or income, but childcare, child development, health, housing, and you really have to address all these things in a kind of coherent manner."

One official did identify a fear which was raised by other governmental bodies and representative groups at the national level. The potential of the proposals to damage the psychological well-being of children was a possible negative effect mooted:

"But there are downsides of course. The childcare issue. Young kids or even kids between five and eleven, their own psychological well-being, depending on the child, might be affected by the absence of the mother."

In particular, the interface between childcare provision and the expansion of the labour market is characterised as problematic. Actors feel implementation is very much dependent on the adequate provision of childcare and not simply the type that broadly emulates the schooling system. Many of those who enter employment may only do so at times which may not align with the average working day of a crèche or childminder. Other respondents identified the potential negative results of relying on the education system as a proxy for developing a differentiated childcare system in that teachers will have to address a new set of issues relating to children who may not have that much of a home life.   The issue of the age of children vis-à-vis activation of parents was deemed quite significant, with the fear of latchkey kids having no services or activities in their area resulting in them being susceptible to 'bad influences.' Some respondents felt that even during the teenage years, young people can require parental guidance which may be absent if these proposals are as compulsory as envisaged. This was raised particularly in the case of vulnerable children.

The complexity of parenting and caring, particularly if combined with employment, was identified by representative groups as being an important factor which respondents felt the policy proposals do not take account of. The need to recognise parenting as an important role in itself, and the need for front-line bureaucrats to accommodate the complexities of parenting and caring roles in implementing the set of proposals is deemed crucial to their success and the progression of those single parents who are the target of these proposals. While national representative groups do highlight the positives of those parenting alone who work or are in education, there is an essential need for the proposals to be optional. Many of those who parent alone already work, while others because of particular situations, may prefer, or indeed find it essential, to stay at home. Representative groups and other actors felt it would be dangerous to make assumptions about what society thinks those who parent alone want, or need. Instead, it was felt the proposals need to cater to what the parents themselves desire or identify as a need.

7.5 Implementation of the 'Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents'

Actors knowledgeable of the proposals and who played a part in their development were asked to outline how the implementation process is envisaged. Actors were requested to comment on the current state of services for those who parent alone and the extent to which inter-agency collaboration would be a requirement for successful implementation. They were also asked to detail whether the proposals would be voluntary or compulsory. While the age of the youngest child in relation to activation is not set in stone, there was little evidence in the national policy interviews that the years mooted in the document will alter significantly. While some officials did identify that the upper age of seven may alter to eight in circumstances where those children are six at the time of implementation, the justification for selecting the ages five to initiate the process, and aged seven to move onto the Employment Development Allowance (EDA) as the new payment is provisionally called, was very much tied to the primary school cycle and the increased flexibility that this is perceived to afford those who parent alone. In this regard officials felt there would be no loss to the parenting role with the roll-out of the policy. Further justification was provided in the average length of claim of those on the OPF payment, cited as being between seven and eight years. When questioned as to whether 12 years of age may be more suitable, all officials commented that 12 years would represent too long a period being out of the labour force.

Officials were also unanimously of the opinion that it would be absolutely necessary to make participation of parents mandatory. Previous experience in both other programmes and initiatives, similar initiatives in other countries, and in a voluntary pilot initiative associated with these proposals – where there was only a 10% response rate - provided evidence to the officials that compulsion was required to make it work. However, one representative group indicated that the coercive nature of the policy may serve to obscure limited or minimal implementation. Considering that a high number of those parenting alone want to work, making the system voluntary might be a better way of improving the quality of the service:

> *"Anybody who has to go out there and entice customers in to use its services is operating in fundamentally different way to most civil service organisations and public organisations work. And that, I think, would be the real challenge to them ... .if they were to do that on a voluntary basis, not a mandatory basis. Then you'd really have to design a system that worked. But the fig leaf will be making it mandatory."*

Yet officials view the proposals as containing an element of choice relating to wanting to improve their own lives and the lives of their children through engaging with the process. If those parenting alone in receipt of the OPFP want to receive higher incomes they will engage in the process so as to advance their own situations. Such engagement is viewed by official actors as the parent making a choice to achieve financial independence.

Although not fully ironed out, there were tentative assumptions made by officials in most departments about how the policy would work in practice. Primarily concentrating on statutory roles, officials revealed that initially a recipient of the OPFP will be contacted to come in for an interview on an annual basis once their youngest child reaches five. This interview will be conducted in a local DSFA office[21] and will involve the case worker, or local coordinator, consulting with the parent regarding their needs and options. It is envisaged that this early contact is viewed as preparatory for what will come in the future, however as one official warned, attendance at the interviews will be compulsory. If the parent fails to attend, their payment will be stopped, within reason. By the time the youngest child reaches seven years of age the parent will be provided with a suite of options compiled from the range of services available in the locality – education, training, or employment – and will move onto EDA from the OPF payment. This stage will see individuals becoming prepared for the labour market through identification of what skills they require and desire, and what sectors they will want to work in. If individuals choose not to engage, or do so and then come out of training and education, they will move onto Unemployment Assistance. Officials do recognise that some cases will require one-to-one contact between the case worker and parent for quite a period of time, and that the overall roll-out of the policy could take anything up to 10 years to do so successfully.

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21 The DSFA is in a process of decentralising responsibility from the central administrative structure in Sligo to local offices, a process which began in 2001

The successful implementation of such a scheme will require a significant degree of interagency collaboration, both between statutory agencies initially, and between the statutory and voluntary sector in the longer term. Whilst the role of the latter sector was ill-defined in interviews, there was an acknowledgement that government departments do not want to duplicate services in areas already supplied with effective services. Implicitly therefore there is a role for the voluntary and community sector here, and explicitly existing structures such as local partnership arrangements and City and County. Development boards are identified as being potential implementation vehicles. Opinions differ as to the extent of involvement of the voluntary and community sector, both from within the statutory sector and voluntary sector. Nevertheless, many respondents identified the importance of local level involvement in the roll-out of the proposals, as the needs in an urban area will differ significantly from those in a rural area. In this regard, national level coordination needs to be replicated at the local level, particularly as this is the tier where most services are going to be provided. As one statutory actor commented:

"We're talking about this happening across the country at a local level in the most disadvantaged areas. Family resource centres are only one piece of the jigsaw. Community development projects, partnerships, CLÁR, RAPID. There's a whole inter-agency piece that needs to drill down to the community stuff and to be honest it's a huge task."

Both national representative groups and local voluntary actors highlighted the inappropriateness of particular services provided, and the need to recalibrate these if the policy is going to succeed. One national actor identified the perceived failure of the system to address the needs of male parents in understanding the system and tendency of such parents to view the system as being biased towards females who parent alone. Specifically, the absence of services for males who parent alone was cited as a significant gap in service provision. The heterogeneous nature of those who parent alone was reflected by social partner respondents also, who emphasised the need to avoid the temptation to implement a one-size-fits-all policy.   One actor identified the unsuitability of the Back to Education programme as it appears to exclude more than it includes, requiring potential participants to be over 18 and out of education for at least two years. In this case young parents are essentially excluded from the programme when they might want to enrol. This was generally summed up as follows:

"But you have things like arbitrary age barriers. You know, until you've passed 23, you know if you're in the age between sort of a 16 and 23 as a lone parent nobody wants you. You're not able to participate in anything. …. people who are trying to make contact with the system are, you know, are told there's nothing for them."

The gaps in services for those parenting alone was identified by officials from the DSFA who openly acknowledged that little was known about them, individually or as a group. There was an acknowledgement that the DSFA does little on the ground to engage with those parenting alone, and isn't good at informing them of what was available across the statutory sector. In addition, national DSFA representatives also acknowledged the weakness of the department in dealing with enquiries and broader communication issues and the need to address these:

"I think we need huge improvements in terms of service delivery. I think that any person who does try to contact this office will tell you that it's extremely busy; it's hard to get through. I think in some instances we've had abandoned call rates of up to 35- 40%. So again, there are huge challenges for us."

Furthermore, the rigidity of FÁS was identified by many respondents as being an existent barrier. In addressing the needs of industry and the economy, one respondent commented that the operation of FÁS programmes reflects industry standards rather than the needs of those parenting alone, and that this will obviously have to change if the policy is to be in any way successful, particularly in relation to progression of individuals:

"I mean the problem with FÁS is that all its programmes are full-time and they all start at 8.30 in the morning and they don't provide, they do provide some limited childcare but they don't meet the needs of lone parents to parent and participate in programmes."

The theme of fragmentation of services and the need for the statutory sector to coordinate their services was viewed as key to the successful implementation of the programme. Despite the general election in May 2007, officials felt the proposals would not

change significantly from those outlined, although specifics around the age of the child vis-à-vis activation were not 'set in stone.' In addition, the commitment in *Towards 2016* to reform income supports tends to safeguard the orientation of these proposals. Despite this, one representative group who met with officials a number of months after the issuing of the proposals felt that the government departments had not moved the process along sufficiently to warrant faith in their successful implementation:

> *"Nothing I heard at that meeting made me think "OK, something is beginning to click into place now ... Social welfare were still talking about tapering. FÁS were still talking about industry standards. Education were still sitting there kind of shrugging their shoulders. Childcare were saying "well you know we've got the childcare investment programme. What more do you want from us.""*

Despite these concerns, officials are acutely aware of the need to adopt a seamless approach and the importance of the DSFA case worker to effectively manage the process for each individual parent, and if needed, prioritise childcare for those parenting alone, although the overall structural issues are far from finalised:

> *"So what we actually have to do ... is to ... to have a system in place which has a seamless connection between ... the health piece, the training and education piece, the childcare piece. Not that the state takes it all over and does it but there has to be a big role for the individual lone parent here as well. We have to think our way through that. But we do know that if we can't ... if we don't have a convincing answer to "where is the childcare", the chances of people being able to take up employment or training ... is massively reduced."*

Other officials were again aware of the inappropriateness of some programmes for those parenting alone and the need to develop ones which are suited to identified needs, and which attempt to overcome barriers to participation existing at the moment. Yet there were other issues affecting the DSFA's ability to implement the proposals, in particular the need to synchronise information sharing systems:

> *"The other issue for us is going to be ... about data sharing between FÁS for example, and this department ... We don't want someone having to come in, give us all their information and then they're, you know, in a years time, when they go for their second meeting, we have to get it all again or they have to give it all to FÁS again. I mean, it should be seamless."*

Another DSFA official identified the barrier of information sharing as being significant in enabling all involved to focus on the individual, rather than the scheme:

> *"The thing is that it is a very bureaucratic process and ... I mean the bottom line is information. It is something that we demand from other people but it's not something we are very good at giving out as an organisation to colleagues ... There needs to be a holistic approach to the circumstances of each individual ... we're not very good at looking at the case management for the one parent family recipients in particular but I suppose that can be said of probably a lot of our schemes as well."*

The ability of governmental bodies to work together for the achievement of policies which cut-across departmental boundaries was an issue which was raised by both governmental and non-governmental actors. Whilst the Department of the Taoiseach and SOGSI were identified as the driving force in implementing the proposals, officials were acutely aware of the difficulties in promoting inter-agency collaboration in the past and the need for the DSFA to push the proposals along. One official spoke of a chicken and egg scenario where individual agencies needed to be convinced that the policy was to be implemented if they were going to invest in it. As one member of the SOGSI put it:

> *"We felt it was far from clear that other areas in the public sector were so well organised or so committed to it, for example, the Department of Enterprise and Employment and FÁS especially. So one of the things ... is to ask DSFA to ensure as much as they can that other parties have got the resources, the commitment, and the plans to do it."*

This issue of cross-cutting policies and working together was commented on by a number of officials. One member of the SOGSI commented:

> "Some of these organisations are quite independent. They don't have a great reputation for working with other bodies. It's not a facet of government that civil service is very good at in terms of the amount of effort required to get systems to work on a cross-departmental basis. The effort involved is quite huge."

These sentiments were shared by officials in the DSFA who identified the tendency of the bureaucracy to shift responsibility for poverty issues to its door, yet the department tends not to have as much clout as other departments in pushing policy agendas through. While the Office for Social Inclusion is important in focusing individual department's work in addressing poverty policies coordination is nonetheless difficult to achieve. It is envisaged that to overcome difficulties in implementing this cross-cutting policy, service contracts will be put in place to facilitate its operation, with each statutory organisation being provided with a set of protocols regarding its responsibilities and role. However, officials acknowledged that they were nowhere near establishing similar protocols for the voluntary and community sector.

Implementation of the proposals will depend significantly on issues pertaining to the services and structures already in place on the ground. Many respondents identified the role of the voluntary and community sector as being important, although as already mentioned, this is as yet undefined. In addition, the provision of locally accessible, good quality employment and the role of the private sector were identified as being important. In this regard social partners were of the opinion that supports should be put in place to encourage employers to develop flexible, innovative working practices to dovetail with the goals of the proposals. Existing flexibilities are dependent on the type of industry and much has yet to be achieved in this regard. While some respondents recommended employers be obliged to introduce flexible working practices, others spoke of reluctance on behalf of the employer to pry into the private lives of employees and the potential effect this could have on introducing flexible working practices. Others again highlighted difficulties experienced by a pilot initiative in Clarehall in Dublin, where weekly shift work hours could not be confirmed until quite close to the beginning of the week, thus making it difficult for those parenting alone to arrange childcare.

Many respondents were of the opinion that education was the key to successfully enabling those parenting alone to move into the labour market. The roles of the VECs and the VTOS scheme are viewed as instrumental in equipping those parenting alone to move into employment above the minimum wage threshold. In particular, there was a fear amongst some representative groups that the implementation of the programme would see the adoption of an employment first approach, to the detriment of those parenting alone and the spirit of the proposals which are broadly viewed as positive:

> "The danger signals that are coming out of the system now with this Employment Action Plan process, which I think would be the most unmitigated disaster and I think if they do that it could set the thing back pre-2000. They have to grasp the nettle on a bunch of services and failure to do that I think is going to lead to much bigger poverty issues than we face at the moment."

As a statutory interviewee commented, the success of this set of proposals depends very much on how they are implemented:

> "I think there's huge potential with this for sure but again, it's all in the cooking as they say."

7.6 Perceptions of Local Actors of Key Policy Actors at National and Local Level

Local level actors were consistent in their identification of policy players both at national and local level, and significantly the importance of the DSFA as the driving force behind the proposals, and the additional consequence of incorporating FÁS into their implementation also. One voluntary actor identified the particular focus that the DSFA and the HSE have on those parenting alone, as opposed to the blanket cover adopted by other statutory organisations:

"Organisationally it would be the CWOs, the DSFA, FÁS; in a way I don't think FÁS is pro-active towards target groups in a break-down situation. Like they wouldn't single out lone parents whereas the DSFA and CWOs would have particular things to give to lone parents. FÁS is much more blanket."

Another voluntary actor perceived the role of the DofF as being pervasive in the implementation of the proposals, and in particular, the funding awarded to departments and agencies and the need for new funds to be provided:

"Well if FÁS or DSFA are given the remit to do something else they'll be looking for where that budget's going to come from if their not going to take it from something else existing."

The notion of government departments being inter-reliant was also indicated as being as core requirement to the successful implementation of the proposals, and the need for regulations and legislation to be structured coherently throughout the administration. In the words of one statutory actor:

"I would think the government because they are the ones giving us all the legislation to work with. And what happens is because it is so fragmented … one bit doesn't follow through to another. Social welfare might decide to pay social welfare but unless that legislation follows through everywhere then we're caught … if one change happens it has to be followed through, that it gets everywhere, and that's a big problem out there."

This disjoint was acknowledged by another actor from the statutory sector, who recognised the need to work more closely with other organisations, statutory and voluntary, who work for those who parent alone:

"I think we need to be linking with voluntary groups, link with FÁS, link with social welfare, linking with whoever is out there to actually provide any of the services because it's multi-faceted."

Statutory actors identified other important players in the one parent family arena, specifically the CWO's and the financial support provided by the service, as being crucial to meeting some of the needs of those who parent alone. However, the health services were also identified as being important for other reasons, from providing interventions in the early days of the new child's life, such as the public health nurse, to the provision of financial support at particular times of need. As one voluntary sector actor commented:

"Community welfare and social welfare because the families depend on those for financial support. We'll act as an advocate for them. Now we'll contact community welfare and we'll contact MABS and we'll contact whoever. You know community welfare … they're the first link for them."

However the provision of financial support is not the only intervention sought from the health services. Voluntary actors mentioned other aspects of a parent's life which requires contact with the health services:

"If a child that I work with needs a psychological intervention I contact the HSE about it. If mum is caring for an elderly person I contact social welfare and the HSE."

Some statutory actors were not very positive regarding the level of intervention provided for those parenting alone, particularly those experiencing certain difficulties. As one statutory actor noted:

"Quite often lone parents could suffer from kind of depression you know, but it's very difficult. Even sometimes when we come across somebody that has problems it's very difficult to kind of find the right people to help them out, you know?"

Other statutory organisations identified as being important included the Galway City and County. Childcare Committee, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the office of the minister for children, the Department of Education, and the VECs, although few respondents outside those education actors interviewed nominated the latter as being a key policy or service

actor. Significantly, partnership bodies existing in Galway were identified as being contributors to service provision for one parent families in the area. One statutory actor commented:

> "I suppose one of the key players in providing specific supports to them as a target would be Galway City Partnership and that would be in conjunction with FÁS, so I suppose they'd be the main ones."

Understandably, respondents from the voluntary and community sector tended to refer to other voluntary bodies in addition to identifying statutory organisations as being important. In particular, the national representative organisations, One Family and OPEN, were both identified as being crucial advocates for those who parent alone. One voluntary actor identified OPEN in particular as being strong:

> "OPEN I think certainly is a serious player in that regard and I think that's recognised within the system because of the structure if the organisation, because it's about groups. I think the system understands that they do know what lone parents want."

Other national and local organisations were also identified as being important, ranging from the National Women's Council and local family resource centres, to quasi-statutory organisations such as the Combat Poverty Agency. Pobal and Planet were also other organisations whose links with the voluntary and community sector were viewed as key at the implementation stage of the policy process:

> "Planet, the networking body of all the partnership companies in the country, you know, and lone parents are one of their target groups. So if Pobal aren't there doing something and challenging then I really would say they're not doing what they're supposed to be doing."

Other actors also identified the role of Pobal, particularly in administering financial aspects of childcare initiatives, as being important to the implementation of the proposals.

7.7 Local Level Actors' Perceptions of Existing Services in Galway City and County.

Actors were asked to identify the most important services available to those who parent alone in Galway City and County. and invited to comment on the operation of those services. The vast majority of actors identified the DSFA as being the most important service provider in the region for those parenting alone, while many also identified the HSE, and in particular the Community Welfare programme as also being significant. FÁS and the VECs were, to a lesser extent, identified as providers of services. All these organisations are now dealt with in turn.

Unsurprisingly, DSFA was referred to as being the most important provider of services and supports to those parenting alone in the administering of the OPFP. However, those working with and on behalf of those parenting alone in the voluntary sector were critical of the administering the payment, citing delays in processing the payment and the rigid adherence to regulations as being a cause of stress:

> "Well it's just there are problems trying to get your payment. I think they're over worked. They're not recruiting staff to go in to single parents. I've a client in X. I have her sorted now but it took me fourteen months. She came from Y; she had an acrimonious break up from her husband. He was a violent man so she didn't want him to know where he was. So she was on supplementary welfare allowance for the fourteen months and she couldn't get her lone parent's allowance because she had to have a letter from him to say that he wasn't paying her maintenance and that he didn't want to know anything about her … there's lot of other ladies out there that are in the same boat."

The emphasis on adhering strictly to rules and regulations was identified as a negative aspect of the DSFA's work, although the need to have some regulatory structure was acknowledged:

"I understand there have to be rules and regulations because you wouldn't sort of want gombeenism ... But the system doesn't allow people to be people; you've got to fit into boxes."

Others who work with those parenting alone identified the difficulty in dealing with DSFA on their behalf. That some who parent alone have low levels of self-esteem and confidence makes dealing with the statutory sectors more difficult than usual, and that any sense of being critical about the service will result in withdrawal of benefits:

"And a lot of the time it's really hard. They will not take complaints from people like me. They say you have to get the person to complain. But a lot of the times these are people who have control over these girls' lives and a lot of the time its money. And they're afraid to make a complaint and afraid to antagonise them in case their money's stopped. I would have a lot of anger as you can hear."

Another actor highlighted similar difficulties in dealing with the DSFA:

"I would rather ring the Galway Childcare Committee than ring the social welfare department and I'm sure it'd be the same for a lot of people ...... They have the freedom to act whatever way they want and I think parents notice that as well."

Criticism of the DSFA was not solely within the confines of the voluntary sector however. As one statutory sector actor commented:

"Social welfare would be a main player, it's extremely bureaucratic. It's either black or white and it can take an awful lot of time to get a payment through."

However these difficulties were acknowledged by the DSFA, at both the national and local level, when asked to comment on potential weaknesses associated with the current range of programmes and services in place:

"Probably the fact that there is very little discretion if somebody falls outside the mainstream ... We're governed by statute; by legislation ... but if somebody doesn't qualify for a lone parent payment they don't qualify. Like the big one always – this goes way back – the fact that somebody had to wait three months if they were separated. So you had a woman who was living merrily with her husband and her three children in X and suddenly it turned round in the morning and he walks out the door or whatever. And she's suddenly in a situation where she was getting an income through him to having nothing. She comes in here to us and what do we say to her? "Sorry you have to prove that you've been separated for three months."... I know its due to be changed but that's an issue."

The delay in administering the OPFP and the need for the department to know more about those who parent alone was also acknowledged by officials in the DSFA:

"Two things: one is the fact that we don't pay people fast enough and that's a processing problem here that we have. We don't have enough staff who are experienced and trained enough to do it. We should be able to do it faster. They do it faster in different parts of the country ... But basically it's down to priorities and that in the area, also, the fact that we don't know enough about lone parents."

There were other criticisms of the operation of DSFA programmes, particularly the Back to Education scheme. The eligibility criteria used was deemed by some actors as being unnecessarily punitive and not as emancipating as the programme would otherwise indicate:

"If you're under 21 you have to be two years out of education. So we had a girl for instance who went back to education when she was 17. Because she was 17 she wasn't eligible even though she'd been two years out of education. But then when she turned 18 she wasn't eligible because she was back in education a year so she was caught every way .... and again it's a cultural set within the health board here. Their very, very strict. They will cut their Rent Supplement."

Again, a recurring theme with this scheme was the impact of benefits and allowances on each other and the degree to which other forms of income are disregarded or not. As a statutory sector interviewee observed:

"A weakness out there is that students are not eligible for supplementary welfare. And you may have a student who has a baby, happens every day of the week. Then everything is cut because a student is a student before a student is a lone parent … So if somebody wants to go back into the education field after they have a baby, that's fine. They can retain entitlements whereas if somebody has a baby, now they'll still get the OPFP even though they're a student but all the Community Welfare Services are closed to them. Whereas if they go back and they're on an approved back to education payment from social welfare then the community welfare door is open again."

The health services and particularly the Community Welfare Services were also the focus of some criticism from the voluntary sector. Those who work directly with those parenting alone were most critical of the operation of the Community Welfare Services, and some of those involved in its administration:

"It depends on who it is that's in that post and then, especially one parent families, like that they've lost their allowance for absolutely no reason. Just that the CWO might have gotten word that there was someone living with them … and that's cutting off their money for two or three weeks and that's huge to them. Like it's absolutely huge."

Another voluntary sector interviewee commented further:

"Sometimes it's the way you're treated by the service. ….. In terms of CWO's, Social Workers, Nurses down in the hospital, Public Health Nurses, they can be very patronising, very dismissive, and actually downright rude on occasion. ….. A comment was made to a girl who had her second baby, her oldest lad is in school, her youngest lad is two, so a five year gap. And basically what was said to her was "are we paying for this one too?" That was the comment. That was a CWO."

Again, as with the DSFA, the bureaucratic administering of the Community Welfare Services was cited as a primary reason for difficulties experienced by those who parent alone. The service experiences difficulties in reaching individuals and families most in need because of a lack of awareness of its existence or misunderstanding of what the service can cover. Furthermore, the geographical division of the City and County can serve to confuse those who do attempt to avail of the service, often having to be redirected to a different part of the City depending on where they live. As statutory actor acknowledged:

"It's a weakness at a national level. It's the way the scheme is built and operated. And service delivery is concerning too sometimes because CWOs are based in geographic districts … It's getting to CWOs I'd have concerns about, that some of them might give up."

Yet the service is more flexible and immediate than other services provided by the state:

"A stopgap we're there as an emergency response, an immediate and emergency response. We've the capacity, we have money. We've chequebooks. We can pay things immediately. We have knowledge and we can refer people to the right services one we get them in in the first place … When somebody falls through all the others, we're there to pick them up at the end."

However, the exclusion of some categories of individual from the Community Welfare Services was highlighted as a weakness by those who administer the system. In particular, the inability of full-time students to avail of the service was cited as unfair and, despite submissions on the issue, the regulations remain unchanged. Furthermore, CWOs are prevented from providing financial assistance for childcare where it would enable the uptake of employment.

FÁS and some of the programmes it runs were identified as a key service provider in Galway City and County. In particular, the majority of actors identified the CE scheme as being the most significant. Although it is not aimed specifically at those who parent alone its characteristics tend to support them more so than other employment programmes. As one statutory actor identified:

"There seems to be lots of training courses available as well, through FÁS and the VECs that I'd be aware of anyway. And some of them are supported, I know the FÁS ones are anyway are supported by the childcare subsidies but not necessarily childcare services, but I think they get childcare subsidies when they are doing courses anyway."

FÁS, like all state services, view those parenting alone as part of their wider target group. It has of late, in conjunction with Ballybane Community Resource Centre and Le Cheile, Westside, initiated a programme specifically designed for those parenting alone entitled the TÓGÁIL project. Prior to this those parenting alone were free to avail of any of FÁS's programmes, although as already identified, many were not suitable, as a statutory actor commented:

"They are absolutely open to all of them but it's back to the, it's I think because of the childminding that lone parents... there isn't such a big take-up except perhaps on the CE programme which is a very specific programme. Probably the most one that would suit the lone parent for the simple reason it works on the basis of working a half-day a week or one week on one week off,"

However, the voluntary sector actors highlighted difficulties with FÁS programmes and unwillingness on behalf of certain individuals within the organisation to engage fully with clients. Other organisational challenges have presented themselves also. One statutory actor commented:

"One thing we have found with FÁS is that it is divided into separate sectors ...... When we are trying to set up different things you seem to have to deal with them separately."

Other actors were critical of the operation of the CE scheme itself, and in particular its inability to progress participants to a defined end. As was identified at the national level, the view that the CE was something which merely occupies rather than progresses individuals was a point of criticism:

"So if we're lucky enough to get them on to a CE scheme they have 20 hours a week which they can manage if they have children of a certain age, and then it's capped at three years. So when the three years is over there's nothing for them, 'tis regression rather than progression after that."

Others again commented on the perception in society about the CE scheme, and notwithstanding the suitability or otherwise of the programme, it is another barrier which faces those who avail of it:

"CE and a lot of people won't say this, but CE in itself, there's a lot of stigma around it. "Sure it's not a real job" and people wouldn't put that in their interview or on their CV, that they've been involved in that."

Despite the apparent suitability of community employment to the needs of those parenting alone, other attempts to engage with this target group have been affected by the lack of childminding and the full-time nature of the suite of programmes available. Despite attempts to develop evening courses, childminding is still a major barrier identified which prevents such parents engaging:

"From the little knowledge I have of people coming in here the issue is childminding and that they're fulltime courses ... A single parent who is unable to take up a programme during the day this office will actually fund them to do an evening course ... There is a very small up-take on it again for the simple reason, childminding. Okay, some lone parents are able to ask maybe a brother, sister, mother, father, a friend to mind a child for an evening but though they would be funded again it's not one that's taken up I think because of the time ... it's the timing I think that prevents them."

The role of government and the provision of funding were something that the organisation was acutely aware of, and the requirement of FÁS to respond to governmental direction. Other statutory services were also viewed as being important, although less so compared to the ones already outlined. These included the provision of some courses by the VECs in the context of training

and education provision. The VTOS scheme in particular, like the CE scheme, is advantageous to those parenting alone due to the supports in place:

"In Youthreach and in VTOS, lone parents that attend there, their strengths are that childcare would be provided, they also let parents work to their own timetable. They can say what suits them and what hours suit them. It might take them more years to complete but they can work around what hour's suit them."

In particular, the operation of the VTOS scheme in Tuam was singled out by some voluntary actors:

"There's also another excellent service, VTOS, the VEC. Anne Higgins is out there in Tuam, they've got a two year course. …. So it's a brilliant service, and there's I'd say, at least every year, about 20 clients I'd refer on to that, a good 80% would get work from that but it takes two years to get to that point. But the reality is these guys are at rock-bottom. It's the confidence thing, and that's the service out there. And it's brilliant."

The VECs are responsible for implementing the Back to Education programmes, and both VEC representatives identified it as a potentially important programme for those who parent alone and wish to get back into education. Yet the administration of education grants by the VEC has been criticised by some actors:

"One young mother went in there two years ago. She applied under the exemptions for the grant that she is estranged from her parents and couldn't provide details of parental income. They refused her application. …… At one stage I spoke to the Department of Education through the support section and was informed that they didn't want to "open the floodgates.""

Other educational initiatives in the City and County were commented on by actors. In particular, one programme, Young Mothers in Education, operating in the City, was lauded by both City and County, statutory and voluntary actors. As one commented:

"So they're young mothers, they don't necessarily have to be single parents. There young mothers in education, and its very, very successful you know, and that's probably personality driven too to a large degree. It depends on the energy the person has for it."

One statutory actor identified what was positive about the programme:

"Saturday morning study skills, pastoral support. They do a bit of yoga, they do some study skills. Something on the Saturday morning that is not really academically based but supporting their academic performance as well and I think that's quite important – you're not just putting them into education with no other supports around. I think it's a multi-faceted problem so it kind of can't be one solution."

Another statutory actor highlighted the importance of this and other voluntary programmes in addressing the needs of those parenting alone:

"I think they're quite important alright, as a meeting place and stuff, to get together and exchange problems or anything else like. And motivate each other too perhaps, like and say "I need this and need that" and they find that a lot of them might need the same thing."

Wider voluntary services were also highlighted as being crucial to meeting the needs of those parenting alone in the City and County. Family Support projects around the County. were identified as being useful and progressive, but the weakness is a lack of resources to improve all the groups that such projects target:

"In providing services I suppose there is not enough of me really ….. There's not such a huge amount of difficulties out here that you need five family support workers but there's physically not enough time to do more for that one group of people. You've got other groups as well that you're trying to support at the same time."

A crucial role played by these support centres is engaging with the statutory sector on behalf of those parenting alone. Providing advice and support is perceived as often being the best way to address the needs of these parents:

"We just don't deal with difficulties either, I mean we have parents coming in to us in regards to helping them with the child benefit, helping them with Corporation housing problems, anything I mean, we'll try and deal with anything. We don't duplicate anybody else's work in the area so if there's an agency looking after, say, the housing we will be that link for the family but we wont look for a house for them."

Again though, there is recognition that the success of Family Support projects and similar programmes are very much dependent on the individuals who work in the centres. One voluntary actor highlighted this thus:

"There's a Youthreach centre in Letterfrack, or its out in Connemara. I mean, again, there's a worker out there who's actually got a crèche developed and got a bus service and they run a great programme for single parents. It seems to very much depend on an individual within a certain area, an organisation that's interested and that's why I need to put the extra effort in."

In providing services there is a sense amongst voluntary actors that the sector is better positioned to meet the needs of those whom they target:

"An awful lot of the time you're looking for funding off them state organisations and it's funding to provide what they want you to provide. So my job it to get money out of you and then try and use that money to provide services the young mothers actually need as opposed to the ones you think they should be getting … I'm being flexible, providing a service that's needed."

This notion of flexibility was also identified as a major strength by voluntary organisations working in the County:

"We're non-statutory which would be in some ways a strength 'cause we're kind of seen as objective, innovative and independent, and one of the rules of the way we relate to clients is that it's totally confidential …. We have a presence of the ground and we're more personable, that we understand issues."

Other statutory services identified as being important included the role of the housing office in the City and County. Councils. Although not high on the list of services deemed essential to the needs of those parenting alone, housing was still identified as an important service:

"Well obviously the provision of social housing, you know, for rent to people that are unable to provide their own housing. …… So, if they're on, say, one parent family allowance they would be entitled to Rent Supplement and then if they wish to apply for council housing they wait on the waiting list of be it Loughrea, Tuam or whatever area they're interested."

County Council actors interviewed identified those who parent alone as being one of their client groups but, like so many state and voluntary organisations consulted, do not target them as the housing list categories are set nationally by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and they do not specify 'lone parents' as a category. In addition, there is no facility in the County. Council to identify those parenting alone on the waiting list and target them when allocating housing, yet vulnerability of such a group was recognised:

"When we're allocating a scheme we don't actually like to see all one parent families … They tend to be very vulnerable if there's any kind of problems in the estate wherever …I find myself it's better to see a mix of family types, there'd be some elderly people and there'd be some families and there'd be some single people. It can be a better mix, but we don't actually set out to mix it. We only really go by whose next in line for housing."

In addition, Housing Liaison Officers experience increasing numbers of inquiries in the County, particularly in areas where population growth is a factor. Tuam, Oranmore and Loughrea were singled out. However, the County Council only has three Liaison Officers to cover the County. The Liaison Officers also play a role in informally advising tenants and those on the waiting lists about services, although this appears to be very dependent on the individual officer concerned. As one actor commented:

> "They would often come across a single, young mother that wasn't aware of their entitlements … They might be living in the family home maybe not getting on with the parents or they could be out in a flat trying to survive and you'd find that particular Housing Liaison Officers would be able to link them up with services, you know, or give them the information and kind of help them with processing their application and that so they would be able to avail of Rent Supplement. So it's good. Anytime you have people on the ground it's worth it."

Some voluntary actors however, tell a different story regarding the work of Housing Liaison Officers:

> "Even for me asking questions on behalf of a family, like as if it was none of my business. …. Those workers seem to have this feeling that the people they are working with, their clients say who are on a social housing scheme, that they're out for whatever they can get and not all people are like that but they seem to treat everybody as if they are, you know?"

The feeling of geographical isolation resonated strongly with those service providers who have regular contact with those parenting alone. In particular, the difficulties in adapting to a new City or area can add to the stresses already experienced while those wishing to live close to support networks often find it difficult to source suitable accommodation due to waiting lists or a lack of social housing in those areas. Organisations administering the housing lists and the provision of social housing acknowledge that this isolation can be a problem for those parenting alone, and the issue of location features as a problem irrespective of who is applying for a house. Requests for transfers in Galway County Council are only addressed in cases of overcrowding or harassment, and even when they are agreed to, the problems experienced are not always resolved:

> "Not all our requests are from one parent families because we try to keep a lid on it, we try to only give transfers where there's actually overcrowding or otherwise like your job would be impossible … You would from time to time get a single girl, with a child and she just finds it impossible … And you find that they would be better off on a smaller estate where there would be less children … But then, sometimes far away hills are green. There not always happy in another area either."

However there is evidence to suggest that the County. Council have engaged in collaborative processes to a certain degree. An example of this is the development of a Family Resource Centre in a social housing estate in Athenry, in conjunction with voluntary groups there.

7.8 Local Level Actors' Perceptions of Issues and Barriers facing those who Parent Alone

Irrespective of sector, the most significant barrier or issue facing those parenting alone is the stigma surrounding their status and the resulting low self-esteem that it produces. Some actors felt that the judgemental view of those working in statutory bodies served to contribute to this perception:

> "Overall, with the statutory agencies, just from talking to the girls themselves, they really have a great reluctance to get involved. I think a lot of the time they feel patronised. There's the whole fear thing that they are being judged and so their kids will be taken into care or taken off them. I mean, I have sat in meetings and you're just going 'just cos she's 18 and a parent, you know, you don't have to talk to her like a two-year old."

Statutory actors were aware of the stigma surrounding those who parent alone and the inability of certain agencies to address the needs of parents in the past. In this regard some commented that the perceived tight monitoring of the cohabitation rule may have contributed to a degree of mistrust of the DSFA by those who parent alone, and the challenge faced by the latter in dealing with the DSFA more generally:

"It's probably a big thing for them especially if you're an 18 or 19 year old girl. You find yourself pregnant, you have a baby, you've to come in here, you've to tell a complete stranger your business who's going to need to ask you who the father is. You mightn't have told anybody who the father is. And you don't want to tell this person. You don't tell this person. "If I tell this person will it get me into trouble, if I don't will it get me into trouble." You know it's a big thing."

However there is some evidence to suggest that since the DSFA began dealing directly with those parenting alone, the perception has changed dramatically:

"Actually having to sit and read what people, their stories. You know, it has changed a lot alright. Plus the fact that there would be lone parents in this office who are getting lone parents allowance and working ... But I think the fact you have to actually face the person on the far side of the counter and it's somebody who's real in front of you and you see them. And you've a picture of what they're like, you see the child, the two children, you know, it brings it closer to home."

Those voluntary organisations working with those parenting alone still view the stigma attached with single parenthood as being a major factor and barrier to those getting on in life. Perceptions of those parenting alone being 'out for everything that they can get' is felt to be still the dominant characterisation of single parenthood:

"It's big, major. Now some of it would be religion based but I think an awful lot of it at the moment now is economically driven. That there just seeing what it's costing the state and there's a whole idea around sponging off the state, getting pregnant to get a house, getting pregnant just to get money. There's a whole perception as well that they have to be doing it on purpose now 'cause "why weren't they smart enough to be using contraception, everybody knows about contraception, so it's their own fault."

This sense of those parenting alone being left behind by the economic boom and the Celtic Tiger resonated with some respondents seeing the inequality experienced by this group as being a result of the stigma they face:

"You know the tide and the boat? Well it's fine if you have a seaworthy vessel or you know how to skipper the boat. There's people there that don't have a life jacket or can't swim. And the key barriers for some of these people are prejudice and racism ... the stigma that affects lone parents, and we're not challenging that."

The sense of stigma attached to single parenthood was deemed to be exacerbated by geographical location. Both voluntary and statutory actors identified the additional stress of parenting alone in rural areas. One commented:

"There's a certain stigma attached and in a rural area particularly, you can be the local lone parent ... it's very isolating to feel that you're not linked in to other lone parents and it's not perhaps regarded in some areas as a legitimate way of living your life. So that can be very difficult for some people."

Other personal problems also affect how those parenting alone interact with the outside world. Depression was identified as a major issue affecting parents and a significant barrier to them engaging with their community:

"Most people don't recognise that the biggest problem children are having right now or the single parents are having is emotional and psychological problems. And they stem from, again, financial and the rest. What you have to address is their psychological and emotional well being."

Some service providers and local organisations identified the need for some parents to be provided with parenting skills classes or methods of coping with stress brought on by worries and difficulties experienced within the family structure. The impact of domestic violence, separation, divorce and custody battles weighs heavily on the minds of some parents and advice in dealing with these and related issues should form part of intervention programmes:

"Something that's really needed for lone parents is how to deal with the other partner, and how do they work out visiting arrangements or custody battles or anything like that. There's nothing like that and especially with the amount of young single parents there are out here as well. There's nothing really to advise them … It's not teaching them computers or a skill but it's a life skill and there's not much of that out here at all."

Low self-esteem was also cited by those who work with those parenting alone as being significant barrier to overcome and the need for programmes being developed to take account of this. A statutory actor commented:

"The self-esteem and confidence could do with work because lone parents are vulnerable, more so even than somebody just normally on the dole."

One voluntary actor spoke of programmes it runs to counteract low self esteem and depression and the results it produces:

"We're talking about the lone parents who are feeling very isolated, having slight depression or suffering depression, who wouldn't have many skills. And a lot of the training that we try and run ourselves would be, we term them free employment training but a lot of it is about self-esteem … and the biggest thing with all these programmes we run is the fact that they'd be like "Oh thanks very much, that was brilliant." For a long time I thought, "What are you thanking me for; this is a little Mickey Mouse course?" You know, but it got them out of the house, it was of huge benefit to them."

Another statutory actor also identified the need to promote personal development in the context of retraining and preparing for the labour market:

"It doesn't really matter what programme your put on, it should really have a number of elements. One is that in terms of the personal development of the learners but also its geared towards employment so we're always looking at what the employment opportunities are, what's out there, what they need to access, have they got the skills to access it?"

7.9 Collaboration and inter-agency working at the local level

In general, most if not all organisations at the local level had a positive view of the potential for interagency collaboration both within the statutory sector, and between the statutory and voluntary sector, to deliver outcomes. A number of benefits of working together were identified. In particular the potential to share information and contacts, and the interpersonal networking that it both requires and produces. One particular benefit was emphasised regularly by members of both the voluntary and statutory sector when working together. In the words of one voluntary actor:

"I think the whole joined up thinking thing can be about seeing what's available, what is being done, what is working and you know, putting a strategic plan in place around that."

The potential for collaborative measures to serve as a method of identifying those that are not being reached was also stressed by those in the statutory sector also. One statutory actor highlighted:

"There is always room for improvement and there's always a sharing and of course as we're moving forward and looking at what's coming down the line … future skills and all the rest of it. Then you're looking at addressing those needs and how we can best support one another in ensuring that we're moving towards that agenda."

The primary benefit identified from working together is sharing of information, and the informal contacts built up, but also the sharing of resources and budgets, and the joint commissioning of services is also cited as being significant. As one voluntary actor involved in such processes stated:

"I think theoretically they are brilliant processes. For the benefit of out clients and our services we should be working together. In terms of resources we can provide, supports we can provide, in terms of accessing services and learning from each other and supporting each other within the work and just making services more accessible and more useful to the people who are using them."

The sharing of information is something which exists between statutory organisations, specifically FÁS and the DSFA, particularly in determining eligibility criteria:

"We're practically linked up. If somebody rings me up ... once they give me their PPS number I can access the social welfare system. Obviously not personal details but I can go in and see, yes, X has been signing on for the last three years or for the last six months."

However, the experience of those involved in collaborative processes with the VECs, and the City VEC in particular, tell a different story:

"The VEC, they may be doing wonderful things but they're not going to tell any of us. Getting information out of them, it's like the secret service ... We produced a small leaflet telling people about our service and it was only after we produced the leaflet that the woman from the VEC volunteered that they actually had a role in this."

There is also information sharing between certain voluntary organisations and the statutory sector. One voluntary representative has highlighted both the formal and informal aspects of such a relationship with the CWO, initiating contact formally before extending such contact through informal channels:

"Well, when we get referrals say, for a family, the first question we'll ask the family is "who is your CWO? Who else is linked with you? What other agencies?" So we contact that agency ... like I just give them my name, say "well we're working now with this family and you know they've told us that they work with you. If you need any information please contact us" and they usually write back and say yeah, vice versa, if you need information from us we'll let you know."

This sharing of information and contact regarding certain cases can facilitate a greater understanding of each individual's role within their respective organisations, and the role and current work of each organisation itself. In this sense working together is viewed as crucial to eliminating duplication and enables the pooling of resources to target cohorts or groups and improve services. One actor working in the area of childcare commented:

"Because everybody is spending individual budgets, possibly on the same things and how do you know that you're overlapping? It means you can pool together, you can pool resources. That's the biggest thing and say people resources, time, money, everything, and information. Particularly information, you know, everybody knowing what everybody else is doing."

The forging of links between actors across sectors is very much viewed as a benefit of collaboration. However there were some differences identified regarding the extent of formal contact. While some in the statutory sector were positive about such contact and viewed it as regular, others cited the influence of the issue in the forging of such links. One statutory actor commented:

"Sometimes its formal, sometimes it's informal ... It depends on what issue you're on ... you know, the City is small, and you meet a lot of the same people at meetings and quite often somebody will say to you 'we're thinking of doing X, Y and Z' and we'll say well we could come in with A on that or we could come in with a grant on that or whatever .... A lot of it happens that way. Then other times it is more formal where you'll get a formal approach from FÁS saying 'we're now completing ... are you interested.' It depends."

The extent of collaboration is very much dependent on which sector is involved. The local level interviews revealed that while there is some collaboration between the statutory and voluntary sector most collaboration tends to be within the statutory

sector. In particular, it was indicated that collaboration can offer a more flexible approach to resolving individual issues. Through increased familiarity the ability to be more flexible is increased. As one statutory actor highlighted:

> "We get a much better understanding of our rules and regulations. We can bend the rules a little to suit because we realise that X organisation can't do this unless we do this so we kind of go a bit of the way and they come a bit of the way and we'll do it."

Another actor from the statutory sector referred to the strong collaborative thrust in the City's statutory bodies:

> "I think that we …. in the City, there's very strong relationships particularly between the State agencies which you don't have everywhere else, you know, and the University as well."

However this feeling of working well together was not shared by all in the state sector. One respondent identified the tendency to work with other organisations in crisis situations rather than it being the norm. Others again identified that collaboration works in relation to the operation of the County. Development Board but their experience of working regularly with other organisations is limited outside of this structure.

The voluntary sector's experience of interagency working is not as positive. Specifically, charges were made in the interviews of statutory bodies having a sense of superiority over the voluntary organisations involved and a limited role for the latter in driving such collaboration. One actor commented on the tendency of state agencies to "take their ball home" if things are not going their way. The same actor highlighted the inflexibility of state agencies when it came to developing actions to address certain issues and an unwillingness to take responsibility and be a lead organisation:

> "Things start at eight o'clock in the morning. Why? Well they just do. Because you started work at eight o'clock in the morning on the building site before you became a tutor. Great, so it perpetuates itself … None of the Departments will give up their power to make decisions. There is no integrated service … It's joined up in the negative way in the sense that neither will take responsibility."

While some state organisations were identified as being more amenable to cooperation with the voluntary sector in particular DSFA, FÁS and the City Council, this view was not shared by all. One voluntary actor commented on a lack of communication from the DSFA on the policy proposals:

> "As far as social welfare and the new thing coming in, the lone parent proposals … I hadn't ever heard about that. I'm supposed to be let known about this stuff beforehand."

State actors identified the requirement to work within legislative rules and regulations as being a difficulty, particularly when it comes to working with voluntary organisations. One statutory actor commented:

> "Policy things are raised at these fora all the time. And while I could take the issue away with me I can't fix it. The expectation is that 'OK, get X and they'll be able to sort something out on this,' thinking that I'm the problem, that I'm making the rules and regulations so I can be talked around. There are problems there."

There is an acknowledgement in the voluntary sector that individuals working in state sector are bound by organisational mores, yet there is also a sense of closing ranks in the statutory sector when it comes to working with voluntary organisations. One voluntary actor commented:

> "Some of the staff in the statutory agencies I think they have got to put on this team loyalty shirt. So if they're in a group or if they're out there saying what the organisation wants them to say they're not going to criticise their own organisation in an external situation."

Another voluntary actor spoke of deliberate attempts by state agencies to block or stymie collaboration between the two sectors:

> "And one of the ways to stymie that is to send different people to meetings and there's no continuity. There are all sorts of ways of making sure that it doesn't happen and I think there are some agencies who actually deliberately concoct ways of stymieing those kinds of processes … the HSE, very good at it."

One voluntary actor identified a fear within voluntary sector of a loss of identity when collaborating with state agencies whilst another identified the potential for state organisations to circumvent any collaborative structure if they so wished:

> "You may try and cod yourself that you're using that structure or that you can try and impact on it but at the end of the say it's very unequal and I think, and its something I've witnessed over the last year or two, I think the commitment of the agencies to it – the statutory agencies – has waned because they believe there's another show in town and that its not partnership. I can see that in terms of participation, in terms of attendance, in terms of being cooperative."

Another voluntary actor identified the need to play the game as such, to make yourself known so as to increase the possibility of receiving funding from the statutory sector. Added to this danger of not being involved, others spoke of the need to be 'in the loop' to ensure that the organisation is still valid and considered important in the eyes of statutory organisations. Some participants within the statutory sector acknowledge the disillusionment felt by those within the voluntary sector due to the perceived tendency of the State to overlook or devalue what the voluntary sector does. One statutory actor commented:

> "I don't know does the State even appreciate what the voluntary organisations do out there. I don't think it does, and then the voluntaries get disillusioned when they do all this kind of good work but they don't really have it properly evaluated. …… And I think that's where the state needs to encourage all the voluntaries and give them the resources and skill and training to actually prove what they're doing."

7.10 Implementation of the policy proposals and service provision

Actors were asked to identify services which needed to be improved if the proposals were to be implemented immediately. Answers ranged from the employment of a particular person to liaise with those parenting alone, the development of self-esteem programmes, reform and streamlining of benefits and allowances, the provision of flexible childcare, adequate housing provision, to the supply of flexible employment. These issues are addressed in turn.

Many actors identified the absence of a particular individual charged with working with those who parent alone as a significant gap in services at the moment. While some differed on the extent to which there should be an actual agency established for parents, the idea of a one-stop shop was proffered as a potentially positive service development:

> "It would be very helpful if a person who was looking to access any of these services could actually go in to one place and have everything there and that every agency knew everything about everyone else … I suppose a one-stop shop would be very helpful for all the information, the resources that are provided. That's everything feeding into one place."

Others were of the opinion that a case worker was at the very least needed to assist each parent through the process, whatever it may turn out to be, so as to ensure that there is continual support for them:

> "And I think that one of the main things missing at the moment is that we're referring clients from one agency to another but they're getting lost in the process that nobody is taking them through the whole progression."

However, local statutory actors highlighted difficulties in having one person acting as a case worker for clients. Current DSFA regulations don't permit one person to know and deal with all the affairs of a client:

"Now we've separation of functions so it'll never get to the stage where it'll be one person, you'd only ever tell one person. It has to be to two people."

In responding to the needs of those who parent alone, many actors felt that services should direct programmes at improving the self-esteem and confidence of those parenting alone, and more broadly, provide support. In rural areas in particular, it was deemed necessary to provide incentives to promote networks of support so as to enable those parenting alone to support themselves and counteract isolation, in addition to other supports provided such as family support. Implicit in this is the need to recognise that those parenting alone are not a homogenous group, but rather can have different needs and desires which should be addressed by service providers. While some are already in employment and might avail of different forms of childcare, others may need basic training skills or more specific forms of training. Others again may simply want to concentrate on rearing their family. As one voluntary actor commented of the service:

"Sometimes I think the strength of my project I would say is someone that actually takes an interest in you and treats you like a human being. I've no agenda, I'm here "what do you want?" and that's what we'll try and do, a flexible supportive response that's based around your needs, your goals, your ambitions. And if that is to have a family, have them young and rear them, then that's fine, that's your choice. So it's giving support and encouragement around that."

A rural actor echoed these issues when recounting how their programme addressed self-esteem and confidence issues:

"The programme I run is a kind of time-out for parents programme so they're not actually learning any physical content in the ten weeks but it's about a time-out and lots of parents don't actually have the confidence to go out and do anything so to go and do a big computer course would be a huge thing for them."

This idea of having programmes which are educational and linked to parenthood was stressed by other respondents too:

"I don't see education as being work driven. …. Education is also linked to self-esteem. Education is linked to your ability to be a good parent. The better educated the mother is, the better able she is to see the importance of childhood … It's about society, it's about being a good citizen, it's about bringing up good citizens, it's about teaching people how to participate in a productive way in society. So it's much more than just about work."

Another barrier identified and deemed a major worry for those parenting alone by those who work with them is the issue of accommodation. While housing was not a prominent feature in inquiries into important programmes or services meeting the needs of those parenting alone, it did nonetheless feature. As one statutory actor identified, finding suitable accommodation can be a life-changing experience:

"Obviously accommodation is a huge thing for people, so if they do manage to get their own house and rent it that can change their life around because they then have a stable place for their children or whatever and they can get them into the local school and can become part of the community."

The Rental Accommodation Scheme was viewed as a method by which some of these issues may be addressed, specifically where social housing is unavailable in desired areas. Connected with this issue is the impact of receiving other benefits and allowances on the amount of Rent Supplement received. There is recognition amongst those in the statutory sector of the importance of Rent Supplement to those parenting alone. In some cases Rent Supplement was viewed as being more important than the OPFP. However actors, particularly in the statutory sector, were acutely aware of the negative financial impact entering the labour force can have on the amount of allowance received. As one statutory actor acknowledged:

"Once single parents have an accommodation that's suitable for them and their child or children they are secure and they're comfortable in it. So if they go to work and they lose that rent supplement then they worry that "maybe I won't be able to stay in this accommodation." So accommodation and rent is very important and affordability. And when they have the cushion of getting a rent supplement then that's giving them a security. Whereas to head out into the market place, if somebody goes to work full-time, regardless of what they earn, we can't pay at all. So it's only part-time work."

The impact of work or receiving other benefits, on the amount of Rent Supplement received is viewed as being a factor which discourages the uptake of training and education courses which have additional benefits attached to them. Other actors identified the unfairness of such a regime which appears to effectively discourage work:

"I used to always think 'twas awful to be one week paying €15 towards your rent and the next week you're expected to pay a €100 because you've got a job and end up being worse off. I used to be waiting for every government to address that. They should never be worse off if they get a job."

Further linked to this is the issue of poverty as identified by actors. The potential for poverty traps to open up as a result of the interrelated nature of benefits and work was a cause for concern for those parenting alone. One voluntary actor who works in a disadvantaged community highlighted the reality for some parents they meet:

"Poverty … It's only when you start actually working with them and see that they don't have food on the table; they don't have clothes for their children, in this day and age. Still this day and age!"

The impact of poverty on those parenting alone, and their families, is more acute for those seeking asylum in this country, whereby recent legislation has resulted in the withdrawal of child benefit for children of those seeking asylum. Another actor spoke of the sense of panic and stress that financial considerations can cause for all of those parenting alone:

"Lack of money; I think that's a big issue for people. I think the associated responsibility of having to cope. Feeling this failure because the money isn't enough really to do any more than survive … That sense of not having money, to be constantly thinking about money, that money just drives every decision you make. And then if anything interrupts that flow when it's not enough in the first place, you know the panic that sets in."

A significant response from those interviewed was the identification of childcare as being a major issue and barrier for those parenting alone. Comments about this issue revolved around the affordability of childcare, access to childcare, and restrictions on the utilisation of informal childcare services by those parenting alone. Affordability was deemed to be a significant barrier for those wishing to access the labour market or engage in training and education. Some voluntary actors commented on the tendency for close family to request some form of payment for minding children, and the lack of free family childcare (contrary to opinion) as being a barrier to engaging in the labour market:

"Even the family now won't look after a child of another member of the family unless they're paid for it. It's gone to that stage, thus they won't attend that course, they won't go on that FÁS scheme, and they won't come to us."

Those in the statutory sector charged with addressing childcare issues realise how crucial affordable childcare is to meeting the needs of those parenting alone. Despite the growth in childcare places in Galway City and County over the last number of years difficulties associated with costs and a lack of resources are experienced in the child care sector itself. One statutory actor commented:

"What's proving to be a barrier for parents and particularly one parent families going back to work would be the cost of childcare and we've absolutely no control over that at a local level. That's set by national policy … I suppose so really we're talking about resources and investment in the childcare sector and I suppose it also effects quality because it means that staff working in the childcare services are on quite low pay so that kind of effects morale and the quality of services."

Accessing childcare was also raised as an issue, particularly by those working in the Galway County. While there was an acknowledgement that childcare services have grown in the City, voluntary actors felt those services in the County. still fall far short of being adequate, whether users want to enter the workforce, re-train, and take up educational opportunities or access short-term relief from parenting. While there are incentives for community-based services to start-up such services, the take up of such incentives has been slow. One statutory actor commented:

> "The community-based services, not for profit services, can access staffing grants so that brings down the running costs of the service. That brings down the fees for parents. But they tend to be only available in certain areas. Say in the City they'd be mainly available in the RAPID areas, outside of that they'd be just private services and they can be quite expensive."

Despite problems in the rural parts of Galway County., other actors felt there are insufficient childcare services in the City centre, particularly short-term, part-time childcare which users could avail of. A pilot initiative carried out by the Galway City and County. Childcare Committee in conjunction with Galway City Partnership brought a cluster of childminders together in an attempt to address this gap but actors still acknowledge that this is a real barrier to those who parent alone entering training or the labour market. Indeed childcare provision is viewed as essential to the successful running of any programme, be it training or education:

> "A lot of courses that have been provided in the past, if we couldn't provide childcare with them –we had to go in and try and find partners who would fund the childcare bit or else the programme generally couldn't run."

However the provision of childcare supports by training and education organisations is limited in that the formal childcare sector must be engaged – childminders and crèches must have relevant documentation. Hence this can inhibit the uptake of such courses:

> "And with the VEC, childcare money comes from the Department of Education and in order to get childcare payments your crèche provider or your childminder must have relevant documentation saying they're registered. And that's a barrier for lone parents who use the lady down the road; they're not going to get payment because she can't provide the relevant documentation. So that's a big barrier, especially for travellers too."

While FÁS was acknowledged by actors for the provision of payments towards childcare, the administering of such payments in block at the end of a programme was deemed to undermine the usefulness of the provision. One possible solution was proffered by one actor:

> "I suppose it would be something that could actually help them to get back into the workforce and into training if they had a childcare subsidy available. So they could actually purchase the childcare wherever they wanted to, whether it was private or community or geographically, whatever area they wanted."

Some actors mooted the possibility of engaging employers, encouraging them to provide childcare services for employees. However one respondent spoke of a voluntary pilot initiative undertaken with employers which failed to result in any significant provision of childcare attached to employment in the City or County.

Other barriers identified in accessing education and employment is the existing level of education which the parent has, and the supply of flexible, high-quality employment. Actors from the education sector recognise that poor literacy levels, while possibly being a spur towards education (so as to help children with their homework) can also serve as a barrier to entering education itself:

> "Literacy again is another area, when we speak about barriers to education for lone parents that'd be one of them and the whole sense of re-engaging with education …. We're very, very aware of that whole literacy issue."

Those who work on education courses aimed at those who parent alone and other groups perceive the rationale of most participants as viewing the course as a stepping-stone to further education or employment. It is something which features high on the list of priorities for those who parent alone:

> *"In my experience of working with one parent families' education is generally quite high up on their agenda ... and particularly many lone parent learners who return to education, they want accredited courses, certificates to say they've participated. They're seeing it as a stepping stone whether to employment of further education."*

The supply of flexible and well-paid employment was also considered a barrier to entering the labour market for those parenting alone. In particular the lack of employment which enables parents to parent was identified as being a significant impediment. The ability to leave places of employment in emergency situations, for example when a child becomes ill, is crucial to enabling those who parent alone to enter employment in the first place. Furthermore, the inability or unwillingness of employers to identify work roster arrangements in advance of a working week serves to further impede the uptake of employment opportunities:

> *"Flexible hours need to be one of the issues if they do go and get employment. I know there are stores here in Galway where that doesn't work and a lot of parents would like to work in those stores but they're not flexible. And from week to week their roster is changed and it just doesn't suit. We would've had families that had to give up those jobs."*

More generally, the incompatibility of work with school times is another factor which actors felt impeded the uptake of employment:

> *"Jobs don't go with school times for kids so that the parents can't find work that works around school. It's either all day or nothing. People don't seem to have the idea that they could employ people between twelve and three or twelve and two."*

Again, the lack of suitable employment which would make work pay, particularly in rural areas, was identified as another impediment:

> *"The jobs that are available here don't pay very well. They're all kind of minimum wage so often it's not worthwhile for the parent to go and look for work because their benefits, they lose their benefits, they lose their medical card and they're better off actually staying at home with their child rather than getting the minimum wage. There aren't any good paying jobs out here."*

Associated both with the lack of employment in rural areas, and as a more general barrier, is the inadequate provision of transport. The stress of getting children to school can be magnified by an absence of public transport, or the unwillingness of transport providers to enter estates to collect children:

> *"Getting kids to school is an issue because buses don't go into estates and if you have a mum who has nine children and four of those are under four or five and she has to bring the whole lot into school with her ... And you know, school attendance is affected because if it's a wet morning she's not gonna get the whole lot out."*

The take up of programmes provided by FÁS and the VECs is also affected by the lack of public transport available:

> *"They're two factors. You can ask me for training centre programmes or for any other programme. I think it always comes back to lone parents being able to travel and then being able to access childminding."*

A voluntary sector actor working in County Galway identified the difficulties in taking up training and education opportunities:

> *"Youthreach and VTOS are both in Letterfrack and that's a huge distance away for people in south Connemara, in Roundstone, in Cashel."*

In addition to major service issues already highlighted like childcare, the availability of employment, and suitable training programmes, a number of other specific services or needs were identified. It was felt that in rural areas there ought to be some representation from national bodies like OPEN or One Family, or at the very least a greater link between them and service providers on the ground:

> "And I know that most of the population of the country is there but there are people in places like this that do need support as well. And like, those organisations, they specifically deal with one parent families all the time, every day and the knowledge they have is just huge … So I imagine that would be a good alternative. To have organisations like that spread out a bit or do days, one day a month in somewhere remote."

This sense of geographic isolation was also commented on by another rural actor who was critical of the concentration of services in Galway City:

> "We try and get things happening on the ground in very much outreach locations, because a lot of the services are still focussed on the City."

The sense of disjoint between the rural and urban areas was also felt by one family support worker who identified the difficulty in getting statutory services to engage with those parenting alone in rural areas:

> "The other weakness with FÁS is that they have to have a minimum of I think 18 people for every course they run so trying to find 18 people is hard out here as well and that means the 14 people that do want to do it lose out because they have to bring a tutor out from Galway. Because we're isolated out here people don't seem to want to come out here from Galway or Dublin or wherever. It means that parents out here are losing out."

7.11 Summary

Despite the high number of issues raised by both national and local statutory and voluntary sector actors in these interviews, a number of commonalities can be extracted and emphasised:
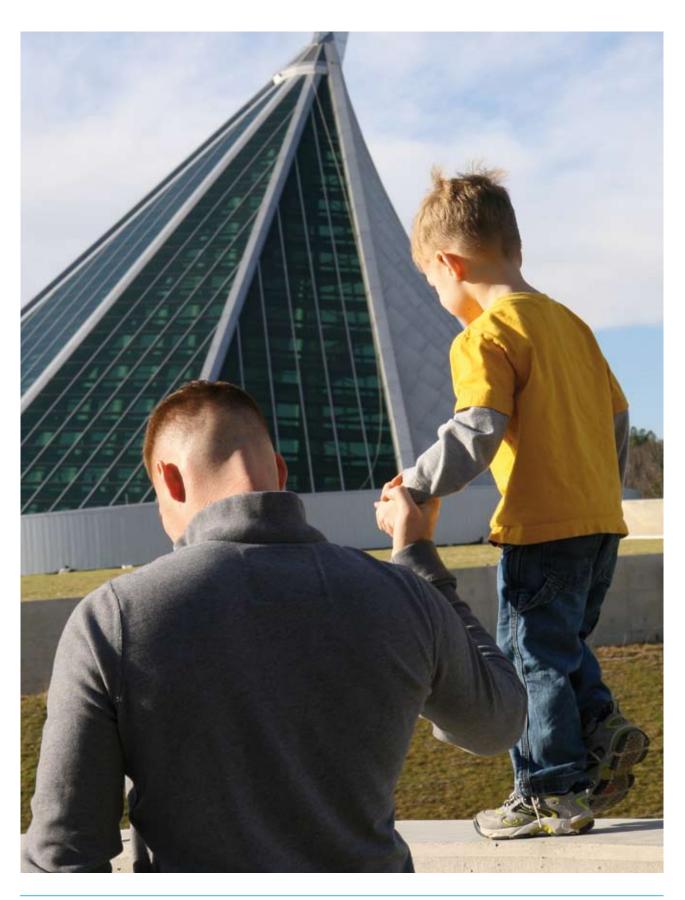
- The need for the proposals to be voluntary. This research has revealed that those who work for and with those who parent alone view the potential impact of these proposals as being both positive and negative. Those parenting alone are not a homogenous group and applying a one-size-fits-all policy will neither address the needs of, nor improve the outcomes for them or their families;

- The need to supply high-quality employment. Part-time employment which is low-paid and low-skilled should not be offered as a simple solution to the problems of the exchequer. If parents are to go out and make work pay it needs to be of a high quality and flexible enough to allow parents to be parents first and then employees;

- Service providers, statutory in particular, need to be encouraged to coordinate their services to meet the needs of those parenting alone, not just fulfil their own organisational targets regarding getting individuals onto courses. If education and training are key planks of the proposals then organisations such as FÁS and the VECs need to be resourced so as to effectively target those parenting alone with a variety of services and interventions tailored to their needs at times that suit the service users. Targeting by other service providers, such as housing authorities, would also relieve some pressure on those parenting alone;

- Both at a national and local level the primary service provider, the DSFA, is under resourced in meeting the needs of those parenting alone. The DSFA itself acknowledges difficulties in even answering all inquiries over the phone. Other actors identified an information gap when thinking about those parenting alone. In short, they simply do not know enough about the lives of those parenting alone so as to effectively address their concerns.

- In addition, many statutory agencies are bound by rules and regulations to the extent that they cannot respond to the needs of individuals when exceptional need arises. The requirement to fulfil certain criteria, particularly in applying for the OPFP, can add stress to the lives and experiences of those parenting alone;

- The impact of the withdrawal of secondary benefits and allowances is detrimental to the lives of those parenting alone and their children and the fear of losing this benefits deters parents from contemplating engaging in paid employment

- In rural areas particularly, many of the issues above are exacerbated. Rural actors interviewed identified an unwillingness by statutory organisations to provide services in rural areas and an inability by parents to access services due to transport or childminding problems;

- Those parenting alone experience a huge number of universal and individual difficulties in their lives. The lack of self-esteem and confidence-building programmes affects the ability of those parenting alone to engage with services and opportunities for employment and education.

- While there is evidence to suggest that interagency collaboration, both between government departments and local service providers, is occurring, it is fraught with difficulty and stymied by some representatives not attending; maybe not being fully engaged in the process

- The need to address the inadequate supply of affordable and accessible childcare provision in the City and County, and the inability of housing authorities to locate families in desired areas where supports may be available, is another problem which should be addressed.
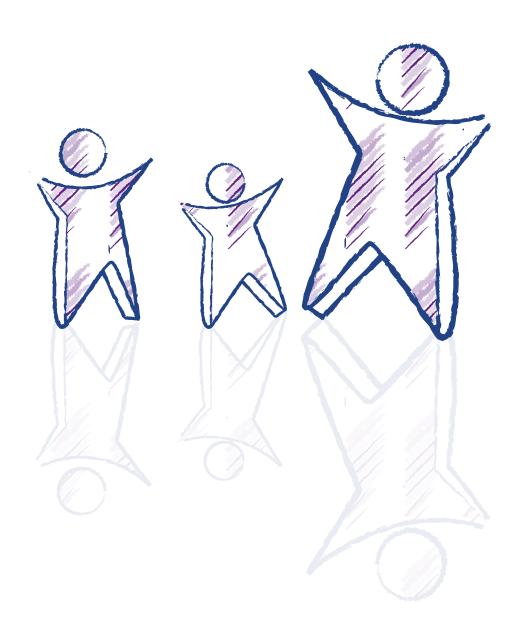
7.12 Conclusion

The interviews highlight a number of issues pertinent to the government proposals for those parenting alone. At the national level actors revealed that the proposals emanated out of concern with poverty levels experienced by those parenting alone and their families, and to a lesser extent that female employment figures could be improved. There was also a concern that despite exchequer funding for the OPFP increasing in recent years it was not achieving better outcomes for those parenting alone. However, non-statutory actors identified the economic drive behind the proposals as being the primary thrust and expressed concern that the proposals may result in placing those parenting alone into jobs at any cost rather than focussing on the needs of the parents. These actors also revealed the relatively shallow consultation process which took place around the development of these proposals. An assertion indeed reflected in the uncertainty amongst officials regarding the degree of consultation with those parenting alone, and the experiences of some highly relevant actors in the overall sphere of family policy. While officials viewed the proposals as being broadly positive for both parent and children, non-statutory actors were more cautious regarding the impact, highlighting the need to have numerous interventions and services in place before the proposals can work for those parenting alone. Key amongst these is the notion of making the scheme voluntary. As one interviewee revealed, if it is voluntary and works well, there will be no shortage of willing participants.

The local level responses were very revealing regarding the potential for these proposals, if implemented, to come unstuck through service provision difficulties. Crucially, despite five statutory service providers being identified as being key in the lives of those parenting alone, a significant number of difficulties were identified by both statutory and voluntary actors regarding the operation of these services. Such difficulties ranged from the identification of rules and procedures as adding to the stress experienced by those parenting alone, particularly those who have just come out of a relationship, to the experiences of service users by individuals within these organisations. Most notable perhaps, is the lack of targeting by such services of those who parent alone. However, other service issues were raised, including difficulty accessing services in rural areas, and the added stress of travelling to the City to avail of centralised services. While the national actors revealed that collaborative processes would be partly critical to the successful implementation of the proposals, local accounts of such processes indicate some difficulties have been experienced, although all realised the importance and benefit of working together.

Chapter Eight
Discussion

8.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to examine ways in which the ROPE committee could actively engage with those parenting alone so as to socially include them. In the Irish social policy space, as with many other (Anglo-influenced) countries, the primary and most successful method of social inclusion is deemed to be labour market activation. In addressing the overarching aim of the project the research team was also acutely cognisant of recent government proposals for those parenting alone and the context which they provided. The thrust of these proposals involves implementing activation measures which will, over the space of two years, move those currently in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment (OPFP) directly towards employment, or into education and training programmes which will lead to employment. Crucially, the proposals as currently constituted imply a level of compulsion. Such a set of proposals represents a significant shift in emphasis, from one which valued parenting and the primary role of the parent in the home as carer, to one which appears to trade that caring role for economic activation, irrespective of existing obligations.

This research sought the opinions and views of a wide variety of actors. The focus primarily was on those in receipt of the OPFP, and gauging their views on a variety of topics, ranging from family life and financial circumstances, experiences of education, training and employment, to identifying barriers which prevent them from engaging with society to a greater extent than they already are. This was achieved through a population survey and a qualitative study undertaken with 60 parents. The research team also consulted with a range of service providers and organizations who work in a number of different ways for those parenting alone. Again, this involved undertaking a qualitative study with organization representatives, statutory and voluntary, at the local level, and key policy actors at the national level. Such inquiries served to further illuminate the lives of those parenting alone and identify in more detail difficulties and challenges faced by such organizations in achieving outcomes for the parents.

In drawing together the key findings of this research a number of themes emerge:

- Aspirations and Willingness to Work;

- Parenting Alone;

- Poverty Traps and Secondary Benefits;

- Lack of Supports;

- Lack of Affordable and Accessible Childcare;

- Lack of Suitable Skills, Work Experience and Self-Confidence;

- Lack of Information Regarding Services and Entitlements;

- Lack of Specific Services for Those Parenting Alone;

- Lack of Flexible, High Quality, Well-Paid Employment.

These themes are now discussed in turn.

8.2 Aspirations and Willingness to Work

The parents in this study describe the difficulties of daily living for those parenting alone. Trying to manage on the OPFP and secondary benefits causes a lot of strain and stress for the parents particularly when there isn't enough money to get by. For some this stress has caused depression and is perceived as the most difficult thing for those who parent alone to deal with. Therefore, being in paid employment would ensure that there is more money coming in and is certainly a strong motivational

factor in the parents desire to work. The respondents in both the survey and the interviews showed a willingness to engage in education, training and employment. This correlates tightly with existing research which suggests a genuine willingness on behalf of those parenting alone to seek employment, and possess a 'mothers and workers' mentality (Daly and Leonard 2002; Russell and Corcoran 2001: 20). However, the research findings clearly indicate that the transition from welfare to work is not straightforward instead those parenting alone face many barriers preventing them from engaging in employment and education. However, the reality is that whilst there are structural barriers to employment there are also individual concerns particularly those around parenting and the needs of the family. In engaging these parents there needs to be a high degree of understanding of individual circumstances.

8.3 Parenting Alone

While policymakers see this proposal as having a minimal impact on parenting, both the survey and interviews with one parent families suggest this to be one of the primary considerations the parents have when entering and remaining in education or employment. In the survey, the biggest barrier to entering paid employment was identified as being able to take time off work at short notice. The participants describe the difficulties associated with parenting alone as including

- a lack of money;

- a lack of secure accommodation;

- being unable to engage in activities outside of the home due to a lack of money and support;

- social isolation;

- being heavily dependent on the extended family for emotional, practical and financial support; and

- the difficulty of dealing with the children's needs without the support of a partner.

The individual circumstances of those parenting alone can be extremely difficult to cope with. The parents feel guilty about being dependent on benefits. They believe that as societal values surrounding the role of women in the home have shifted, they are now stigmatised for not working outside the home. Murphy and Millar (2007) note that with regard to the UK Williams argues that the current policy discourse labels mothers parenting alone who wish to remain in the home for their children as 'welfare dependents' whereas married mothers are viewed as exercising choice (1999, 676). Levitas contests that in Britain "young women are not allowed to be full time mothers" as those who are unable to live with parents or partners are obligated to live in 'supported housing' and engage in education, training and employment (2001; 452). A compulsive approach will serve to further stigmatise those parenting alone and devalue their role in society as a family form deserving of state protection.

For these parents the needs of their children far outweigh their own. The impact of all actions on the children is fundamental in their decision making. This in line with national research which suggests that Irish mothers make decisions based on the impact such decisions will have on their children (Daly and Leonard 2002: 16). Furthermore, international research highlights that those on a relatively low income tend to put children before career, education or marriage, and are focused on 'being there' (Edin and Kefelas 2005: 204). The parents' decision surrounding involvement in employment or education is primarily dependent on whether or not it will impact negatively on their children. While the long term well-being of the child was often the main motivation for parents to be involved in education, training or employment, if the child's well being is affected parents are unlikely to remain in employment, training or education. Such a belief is very much in line with international evidence which suggests that the absence of the parent from the home may impact on the child's emotional and psychological well-being (Sawhill et al, 2002; Zaslow et al 2002; Morris, 2002; Hamilton, 2002 cited in O'Brien, 2004). Such an absence can increase the stress on both mother and child (Morris and O'Brien 2004).

The child's level of dependence on the parent varies by age with children of pre-school age needing a lot of time and attention. Teenagers require stability, security and structure, and a strong concern held by many parents is that unsupervised adolescents are prone to engaging in unsuitable activities. Just as the parent's health can impact on their ability to remain in employment so too can the health of the child be a factor. Children with learning difficulties present extra demands on the parent. While wanting to work, what the parents' desire is employment that enables them to look after their children in a manner in which the parent thinks is best for their child. Such employment would ideally be part-time; close to home and school; flexible; during school hours; and with an understanding employer who will allow them to take time off at short notice should the child be sick.

Spending time with their children is a priority for the parents. In particular, being at home to do homework and make dinner is important to both them and their children. Ultimately the parent being what they describe as a 'good parent' coupled with the children's happiness and well-being over-rides the financial gain being in paid employment may bring about. The implementation of the policy at the local and national level must acknowledge the centrality of parenting in the lives of those parenting alone and any engagement with the labour market will be conditional on its impact on children. The proposals as they currently stand regarding the age of youngest child being seven when the parent will enter paid employment disregards the concerns parents have about teenagers and this must be taken into account. At the local level the wider issue of parenting and the particular circumstances of parents must play a central role in the activation process.

8.4 Poverty Traps and Secondary Benefits

Adult poverty, child poverty and child well being will only be addressed if the parent and families financial situation improves as a result of going back to work. As it stands, the levels of poverty amongst those parenting alone is significantly higher than other vulnerable groups, with 31.1% experiencing consistent poverty (EU-SILC 2005). Despite rises in welfare payments in recent years a recent analysis suggests that current rates of pay still leave those parenting alone, and their families, below the poverty line (OPEN 2006).

Yet employment and poverty traps form a significant barrier for respondents entering education, training or employment, in particular Rent Supplement, the Medical Card and the Back to School Allowance. The over exposure of the participants in this study to the private rental market means entering well paid employment could leave them less well off. Instead participants tend to opt for work which will not interfere with their rent allowance. Such work is low skilled and low paid and likely to require flexibility from the employee. Yet those parenting alone want the employer to be flexible. There is a clear tension here between these two positions which will need to be overcome. Parent's living in social or voluntary housing have a greater incentive to work as an increase in income may lead to an increase in their rent this is however proportionate. Some of the respondents had actually left paid employment due to a loss of secondary benefits, while many others were deterred from even looking for employment because of a fear of losing the rent supplement. The loss of the medical card is also a disincentive. Despite the introduction of the GP only medical card – which may provide more security to the parents in opting to take up paid employment – the threshold level at which such a benefit is received can equally play on the minds of those parenting alone when entering the labour market.

For many of the participants there was no logic as to how the various benefits interacted with each other and a frustration in that as soon as their financial situation improves through employment they can actually become worse off as benefits and entitlements are withdrawn. Implementation of the policy proposals will require the particular circumstances of individuals be investigated, particularly with regard to their housing situation and secondary benefits, to ensure no one is worse off by taking up employment. At the local level the housing needs of those parenting alone is in need of redress. While the Rental Accommodation Scheme is being implemented, targeting of those parenting alone has not happened. Securing permanent accommodation is one of the primary priorities for those parenting alone in Galway City and County and would take many of them out of the poverty trap created by the Rent Supplement Scheme.

8.5 Lack of Supports

Informal supports from the extended family for those parenting alone assists them in coping and dealing with the stress and demands of caring for their children. Such support is most likely to come from the parent's extended family, particularly the grandparents, and includes emotional, parenting and financial support. Some parents move closer geographically to their family in order to utilise the wider family support network and some move into their parent's home. Yet such dependence on the family can cause a strain and a sense of guilt. Grandparents play a significant role and were seen as the best people to look after the children should the parent go to work, be in education or training, or when they are socialising. This stems from the importance the parents place on being able to trust the person who cares for their children – grandparents, aunts and uncles are considered most suitable. Equally important is the fact that informal childcare by family members is either significantly cheaper than formal childcare or free.

The absence of close family support, mainly due to geographic distance, can lead to greater social exclusion and isolation for those parenting alone. Parents' already limited ability to become involved in activities outside the home is further curtailed by such an absence. This lack of involvement leads to even greater exclusion as the parents' opportunity to create other forms of social networks and support is restricted. In the absence of wider kin and non-kin supports children are often totally reliant on the parent, and for some there is no option but to defer from engaging in paid employment until the children are older. Parents who have recently experienced marital breakdown or the ending of a long term relationship are also in need of supports, particularly practical support to enable them help with the impact these changes have on their children. The respondents identified the need for locally based support groups for those parenting alone, with particular emphasis on support after relationship break down and non-judgmental advice for young parents from more experienced members.

8.6 Lack of affordable and accessible childcare

In the survey the second most cited barrier to employment in Galway City and County is a lack of suitable/affordable childcare. Very few of the participants in the study have experiences with formal childcare. This was due to a preference for informal childcare arrangements and difficulties in accessing affordable childcare throughout the City and County. Those parents who could not avail of informal arrangements are prevented from looking for employment until their children begin school, as the cost of childcare was seen as prohibitive. This was linked to the fact that many of the parents did not have the skills or training necessary to command a wage high enough to cover the cost of childcare and be better off financially by working outside of the home.

For those in receipt of rent allowance, the cost of childcare combined with a loss in benefit related to renting made the option of paid employment impossible. Parent's engaged in education and training, although in receipt of childcare subsidy, still found meeting the cost of childcare prohibitive. They also had difficulty in finding a childminder or getting their child a place in a crèche. Many crèches were reported as being very inflexible, only offering full time places which did not suit many of the parents who wish to work part-time. As the proposals stand, there is an implicit assumption that childcare will not be a significant issue in the parent's decision to take up employment, as the children will be in school. However, thought has not been given to school holidays and what happens should the children become ill. Those parenting alone rely heavily on the extended family for support at such times.

8.7 Lack of suitable skills, work experience and self confidence

In the survey, the top two priorities respondents have for the next few years are getting some more qualifications and building their self confidence. Many of the local service providers commented on the low self confidence of some people who are parenting alone and this was also identified by some of the parents themselves. For many of these parents such barriers stemmed from the break up of relationships, and being away from paid employment for some time. Parents worried about their ability to get a job, balance work and home and be able to get on well in the job. Being out of the home interacting with colleagues and customers

was daunting for some of the parents who haven't worked in many years and the first step for them in even thinking about employment was to work on their self confidence. A lack of relevant work experience was preventing some participants who have recently engaged in education and training from finding employment in that area. This leads to a questioning of the relevancy of the training if successful trainees cannot gain suitable employment at the end of the process.

There is a strong desire amongst the respondents to engage in further education and training prior to entering paid employment. Access to such services is limited for those parents living in the County. While there are training schemes in the towns around the County, not all training courses are available in all towns, and a lack of transport can prevent involvement in these activities. Although some of the parents had a specific education or training course that they wished to pursue many were vague and needed direction and advice as to what options were available to them. As with employment even though education is a priority for many of the respondents, they will only engage in training that is available to them at a time that suits them and their children, with a preference for part-time courses run locally when the children are in school.

Implementation of the proposals will require those agencies involved in providing education and training to accommodate the needs of those who parent alone. As with employment, the time of the day that training takes place will be key in a parent's ability to engage; part-time courses provided around school hours will best suit individuals. Access to education and training for those individuals living in rural areas needs to be addressed and creative ways of providing outreach education needs to be explored by service providers. Education and training with an emphasis on personal development and capacity building inbuilt into the curriculum would provide a more inclusive approach to individuals who are returning to education after many years and who may have had negative experiences of the schooling system. A number of courses and programmes were identified as being examples of good practice. Such courses tended to be very supportive to participants, particularly with regard to their parenting role, as well as dealing with self development and capacity building.

From the survey it is evident that there is a wide variation in the previous educational qualifications and experiences of those parenting alone in Galway City and County. Some parents wish to do their Leaving Certificate whereas others already have a Third Level qualification. Agencies must adopt a tailored approach and consider the particular education and training requirements of the individual in line with their preferred type of employment. Attention needs to be paid to ensuring individuals involved in training and employment schemes progress from their initial training. Respondents reported difficulty in securing employment relevant to their courses because they lacked relevant work experience. Training schemes with a work placement attached might put trainees in a better position to progress

8.8 Lack of information regarding services and entitlements

Parents found dealing with agencies quite difficult, primarily because some agencies are not forthcoming with information about entitlements and services. It appears that the onus is on the individual to find out about what is available to them. The rules and regulations surrounding services and entitlements are regarded as far from straight forward. A lack of complete information prevents some parents from exploring options available to them, as does the greater fear of losing benefits. The welfare code is extremely complicated and difficult to understand, particularly in relation to what happens when someone who is in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment and secondary benefits takes up paid employment. Implementation of the proposals will require agencies to be more pro-active in providing information in a straightforward user-friendly manner. A simple check list of the forms and paperwork required in order to obtain a benefit or service should accompany every application form to ensure that individuals do not have to make several visits to one agency about the same matter. Agency staff need to be made aware of the needs of those parenting alone, specifically the low levels of self-confidence and the stigma they experience. Within the City and County, agencies need to have greater awareness and information about the services offered by other organisations so that parents can be told who can assist them with their queries or needs. This is particularly important for the DSFA, FÁS and the CWO, who as we know from the survey are the agencies that have had the greatest level of engagement with those in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment.

8.9 Lack of specific services for those parenting alone

Some participants spoke of having a positive experience when dealing with service providers in the statutory arena. However the majority recounted difficulties in dealing with them. These difficulties come under three main categories: experiences with personnel of the service provider; experiences of visiting the service provider offices; and a lack of efficiency and consistency in the application of rules and regulations governing benefits and allowances by service providers. As already outlined, many participants suffer from a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. However, personnel working with service providers which cater for those parenting alone have in some cases come across as intimidating and overpowering, discourteous and unprofessional, making parents feel overwhelmed and further damaging their confidence. Statutory offices can be daunting places, and although some agencies have catered for those parenting alone in recent times, there is still much room for improvement. Quite often one bad experience with one representative of an agency can leave a lasting impact on the respondents and can often make them reluctant to return to that agency for information.

Successful implementation of these proposals will require a significant shift in the orientation of services and in the way, both collectively and individually, they address the needs of parents. Service providers need to actively seek to engage with those parenting alone. This involves recognising that while the group shares certain characteristics with other client groups – such as those in receipt of unemployment benefit – they also differ from this group in certain ways. Furthermore, those parenting alone can have particular personal characteristics or face specific issues, as outlined in this research, which will need addressing in an imaginative and novel manner. Simply identifying one staff member, or a pair, who liaise consistently with a parent can have huge positive effects for the parent. It is important however, to ensure that when using such a case worker approach that all staff receives diversity and equality training. Experiences in other countries suggest cultural difficulties are an easily overcome barrier if approached in the right manner (Holland 2005). Such regular contact between appointed staff and the parent can lead to a greater degree of comfort on the part of the parent and increase efficiencies in the output of the service provider. Such a development could also lead to the accurate maintenance of personal details and reduce the stress experienced by parents - particularly when required to repeatedly submit the same information – and enhance the sharing of information between parent and service provider.

In addition to this, it is evident that many participants had difficult experiences at the hands of individual staff members. Encouraging those parenting alone to engage with service providers, be they DSFA, CWOs or FÁS, will require an attitudinal shift on the part of some personnel in these agencies, especially where discretion in the application of rules and regulations is a factor. Encouraging staff to build up a relationship with those parenting alone and in receipt of benefits can further alleviate the sense of remoteness some parents feel when engaging with agencies.

Collaboratively, agencies in the City and County should be encouraged and resourced to initiate processes which lead to improving the lives of those parenting alone, and their families. The benefits of agencies working together have already been acknowledged in the research, but more importantly, the benefits for parents need to be recognised. This will require organisations committing themselves to working together to implement a strategy at orientating services towards outcomes for parents rather than concentrating on the activities of each individual organisation. Finn (2000: 45-53) speaks of the need to forge a common agenda amongst capable local institutions and networks. Such commitment will require, at a basic level, senior management recognising the benefits of, and 'buying into' the overall process of collaboration. Furthermore, the identification of staff and ring-fencing their time to dedicate themselves to such processes is a clear need necessitating action. Familiarity among agency personnel can lead to a greater understanding of each organisation's role and embed formal networks emerging from the process. Appropriate feedback mechanisms within organisations should also be developed so that front-line service staff are aware of developments and can disseminate information to service users.

More broadly, the role of partnership networks should be considered as a potential template to be adopted collectively by all relevant organisations with a role to play in addressing the needs of those parenting alone. The position of the voluntary sector should not be underestimated here either. Many such organisations have a great deal of experience in meeting quite specific needs of those parenting alone and in this light, these organisations should be resourced sufficiently so as to actively engage

in the collaborative process as an *equally valued partner*. It needs to be recognised also that voluntary actors already devote a huge amount of time and resources outside of their regular work to some collaborative processes. Resourcing such organisations adequately is key to the maintenance of their work and extracting the added value of having them involved.

8.10 Lack of flexible, high quality and well paid employment

315 of the respondents to the survey have looked for employment in the last 12 months. Research into those parenting alone and in employment in the UK and Northern Ireland – highlighted in the literature review – suggests the type of employment taken up is low-paid, low-skilled, characterised by long unsocial hours and poor working conditions. In addition, many of those in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment who work do so on a part-time, low-pay basis (Byrne and Leonard, 1997: 62). The low-pay aspect is perceived as the exchange for greater flexibility afforded by part-time work. While such a trade-off may suit those parenting alone, many felt that they were under utilised in their jobs while there. Existing research has indicated that the state training and employment agency, FÁS, has placed 1,918 parents in full-time employment while only placing 4 in part-time employment (Ralaheen 2006: 20). This research has highlighted that one of the primary barriers to those parenting alone is the lack of flexible employment which will result in an increase in income levels. Service providers interviewed identified the difficulties parents will encounter in securing flexible, high quality well paid employment which is part-time and family friendly. This will be even more difficult for those parents located in rural areas who experience aggravating issues such as lack of transport, accessible childcare and support networks.

In enabling those parenting alone to take up high-quality employment there needs to be recognition that such a process can involve a significant initial expense. Clothing, transport, childcare and a potential loss of income through withdrawal of benefits are all factors which need to be addressed and ameliorated in a steady, structured and mindful manner so as to soften the abrupt change in their lives. Supports which enable those parenting alone to take up employment, should they so wish, need to be considered in this regard.
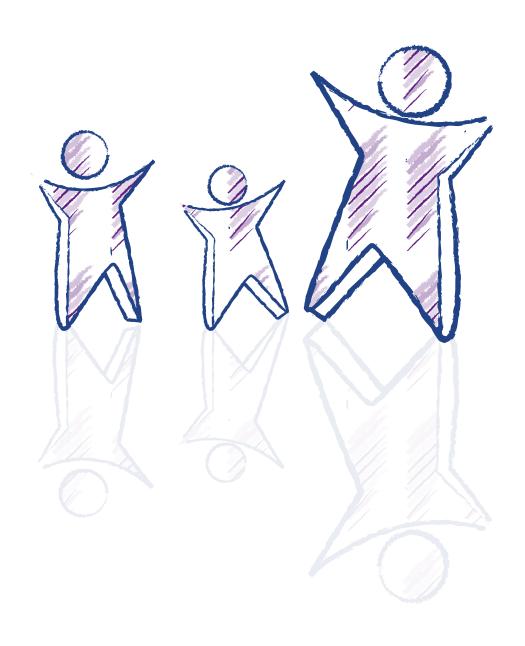
However, illuminating pathways into employment is only useful if such employment is of a high-quality also. Notably absent from discussions on labour market activation of those parenting alone is the voice, position and role of employers. Dialogue needs to take place with employers to identify the potential of employing those parenting alone in highly-paid positions while recognising the latter's role as primary carers. This should involve the exploration of new and innovative methods which permit flexibility while protecting the self-identified goals of parents.

8.11 Conclusion

The participants in this study describe the difficulties of daily living for those parenting alone. Yet despite this, there is a clear message emanating from the body of information analysed in the study – the aspiration of many participants to engage in education, training and employment so as to achieve their aspirations and improve the financial circumstances of themselves and their families. However, it is also clear from the research that this desire is a tempered and conditional one. Any process which results in education, training and/or employment must take account of a number of barriers identified by the participants. Chief among these is the concern the participant's expressed about caring for their children. The parents involved in this research very much view themselves, first and foremost, as primary carers for their children. Yet other barriers also exist. These include information and knowledge of the mechanics of the welfare system, the need to have high-quality, flexible employment, affordable, accessible childcare, and the need to build confidence and self-esteem. Implementation of the policy proposals will need to take account of these common difficulties, while also allowing room for individual circumstances. From the findings of this research therefore, the government proposals as they stand – to socially include those parenting alone by way of compulsion – appear to be restrictive and could ultimately be ineffective. For many of these parents, compulsion into such a process will not be a panacea for their ills; rather it may simply place an extra burden on an already demanding life.

Chapter Nine

Recommendations: Towards a Better Future for One Parent Families in Galway City and County

9.1 Introduction

In light of the findings and discussion the research team would like to make the following recommendations:

9.2 Parenting

- In terms of the current policy proposals we recommend that the activation process be voluntary. An activation process built on employment may be damaging to one of Irish society's family forms most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. Those parenting alone are on a continuum of ability to engage in paid employment with some more ready than others. Whilst many parents are ready to begin the activation process some are not in a position to do so. Forcing them to take up paid employment before they are ready will undermine their role as primary care givers, exacerbate their already low levels of self-esteem and endanger the stability of the family unit.

- In the event that the activation process is a voluntary one we recommend that it not be implemented until all mechanisms to support the proposals are firmly established. To implement the proposals at present may undermine the activation process. National policy actors need to provide resources and establish procedures for local service providers to prepare themselves to implement this set of proposals.

- The activation process must begin by taking into account the individual circumstance and parenting needs of each One Parent Family Recipient. Initiation of the activation process must begin by addressing the self-identified needs and aspirations of the parent with regard to education and employment. These needs and aspirations must remain central to the activation process throughout its implementation

9.3 Poverty Traps

- The Rental Accommodation Scheme can provide those parenting alone with secure and permanent housing and leave them less exposed to the vagaries of the private rental market. We recommend that the scheme be rolled-out as soon as is possible so that all vulnerable groups in need of permanent housing be accommodated under the scheme.

- We recommend that the way benefits and entitlements interact to cause poverty traps be reviewed and a more flexible approach be adopted to the administration of secondary benefits in the meantime.

- Individual parents beginning the activation process must have their own benefit situation investigated to ensure that none are worse-off for taking up paid employment.

9.4 Supports for those parenting alone

- There is a need to explore the introduction of intervention programmes to assist those parenting alone cope with the demands around parenting through capacity building and self development in particular for young parents and those who have recently experienced the breakdown of a relationship.

- We recommend that the issue of providing support for children in one parent families in Galway City and County be explored. With particular reference to those children whose parents are separating due to the breakdown of a marriage or long term relationship.

- We recommend that the establishment of locally based support groups throughout Galway City and County be encouraged as this would provide an important source of informal support where those parenting alone can support one another in a non-judgmental and positive environment

- The formal family support interventions already in existence in Galway City and County should be explored with regard to what local service providers can do to enhance informal and formal supports to One Parent Families.

9.5 Education, skills and work experience

- We recommend that the individual education, training and employment history of those involved in the activation process be built upon. This will involve recognising their existing strengths and working with the parents to identify areas which are in need of training and or upskilling in order to help them achieve their preferred type of employment.

- We recommend that all education and training for those parenting alone are grounded on personal development and capacity building as well as supporting individuals in their role as parents.

- We recommend that education and training providers in Galway City and County explore the possibility of including a work placement inbuilt in the course or supervised period of work experience on completion of their course work which would be supportive of individuals in their role as parents

- Whilst we note the resource limitations and the pressure of economies of scale local service providers need to be more focused in addressing the educational and training needs of those living in rural areas and examine more creative ways to provide locally based courses in these areas.

9.6 Childcare and the needs of adolescents

- Family members and friends of those parenting alone who are already engaged in the provision of informal childcare or are thinking of doing so need to be made aware of how they register as a childminder and the tax and benefits implications of so doing.

- Childcare financial supports provided by education and training providers need to be reviewed and kept in line with real price increases in childcare in Galway City and County.

- The provision of additional affordable community based childcare facilities should be developed in Galway City and County.

- Creative and innovative ways in which care can be provided outside of the home for older children and young adolescents need to be explored and fostered in Galway City and County. This should consider both after school activities as well as well as covering school holiday periods.

9.7 Information

- We recommend the creation of a self contained booklet with all the relevant information for those parenting alone regarding benefits, entitlements, education and training and opportunities as well as supports for re-entering the labour market in Galway City and County be produced. Such a booklet should contain information on all agencies working with those who parent alone and include contact names, email address, webpage and telephone numbers. This booklet should be posted out to all currently in receipt of OPFP and handed out by the DSFA to new claimants during their initial interview.

- In particular such information needs to contain user friendly accounts and examples of how the OPFP as well as secondary benefits will be impacted upon should a parent return to work.

- We recommend that an internet portal be established whereby those parenting alone can easily access current information to a range of services voluntary and statutory in Galway City and County and that this be publicised extensively.

- We recommend that when inquiring about benefits and entitlements individuals are given a checklist of all the information and paperwork that is required from them to successfully complete the application process.

- The research highlighted the high costs associated with contacting agencies particularly by telephone we recommend that agencies explore the possibility of introducing free-phone numbers or a text service in which the agency can call the individual back.
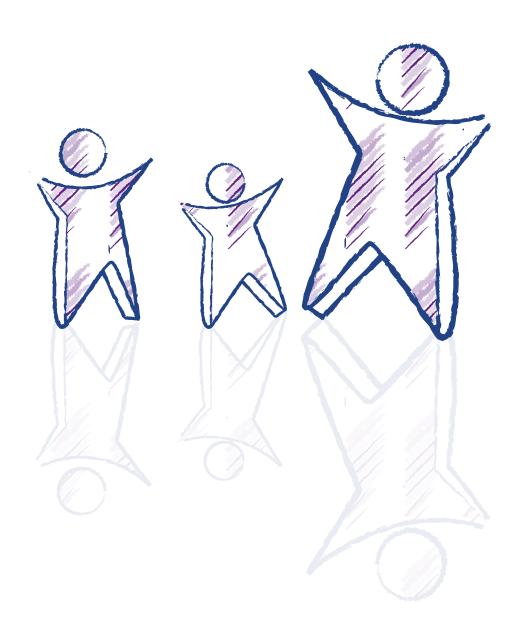
9.8 Family Friendly Employment

- We recommend that employers in Galway City and County and their representatives be encouraged to engage with the ROPE Committee processes.

- Employers in Galway City and County need to be consulted in order to understand the demand for flexible part-time employment and how they might be assisted in employing parents interested in such employment.

- We recommend that ROPE examine the possibility of an entering into a pilot programme of employment with a large locally based employer or a number of smaller employers who offer flexible part-time employment suited to the needs of those parenting alone.

9.9 Service Provision

- We recommend the training of those front-line staff that interact with those who parent alone in Galway City and County so as to ensure they are aware of the needs and experiences of the individuals they come in contact with.

- We recommend that dedicated staff dealing with those parenting alone (though not precluding other groups) be established in agencies involved in the activation process. Such attachment with this particular group would improve the experiences of those parenting alone as well establishing a network of core front line staff across the statutory and voluntary sector

- We recommend that senior management in those agencies in Galway City and County working for and with those parenting alone establish a forum for information sharing and strategic, seamless collaboration so as to improve services and outcomes for those parenting alone. This forum should include all organisations: community, voluntary and statutory.

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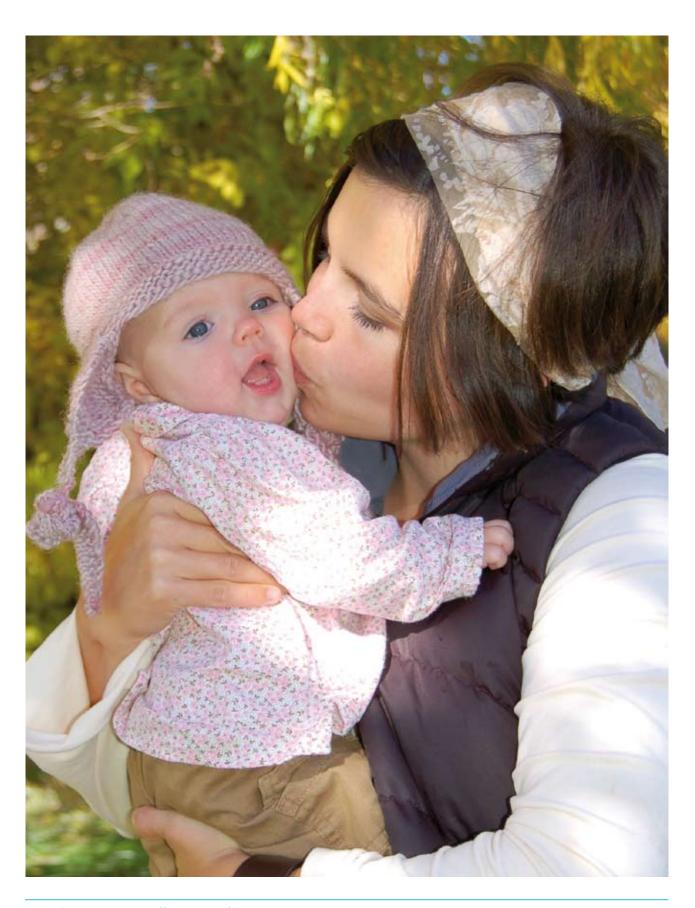
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Appendices

Current list of One-parent Family Research Steering Group

Chairperson:	**Elaine Harvey - LESN**
Members:	**Rita Commins - FÀS** **Sue Curley – Health Service Executive** **Joe Curran - Cumas Teo** **Brid Dooley – Galway City Development Board** **Fionnuala Foley – Galway City & County Childcare Committee** **Jimmy Glynn – Department of Social & Family Affairs** **Patricia Kelly – Galway Rural Development**
In Attendance:	**Declan Brassil – Manager, Galway City Partnership** **Ciara Bradley NUI Galway PhD student** **Ann Irwin - Independent Research Advisor** **Eileen O'Toole - One-parent Family Advisor**
Convenor:	**Charlie Currie – Services to the Unemployed, Galway City Partnership**
Contract Researchers:	**Dr. John Canavan** **Liam Coen** **Michaela Donegan** **Dr. Michelle Millar**

One Parent Family Questionnaire (OPFQ)

Dear respondent,

Thank you very much in advance for taking the time to fill out this survey. We would like to assure you that all responses are <u>anonymous</u> and that any publication of the results will use summarised data only which will make it impossible to identify individual respondents. Please place the survey in the <u>freepost envelope</u>, together with your <u>draw entry form</u>. As part of this research we will also do interviews with individuals in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment and we are looking for participants. If you are interested in getting involved, please tick the box on the draw entry form.

The questionnaire is divided into subsections that look at work, education and/or training. This means that you may have to skip questions that are not applicable to you. We would therefore like to ask you to watch out for arrows and instructions that are intended to guide you through the questionnaire.

A1.   **Are you male/female?**   ☐ Male   ☐ Female

A2.   **What age are you at present?**   Years _____

A3.   **For each person living in your household please tell us their sex, age and relationship to you.**

	Are they?		How old are they in years?	What is their relationship to you? (e.g. child, mother, father, roommate, sister)
Person 1	☐ Male	☐ Female		
Person 2	☐ Male	☐ Female		
Person 3	☐ Male	☐ Female		
Person 4	☐ Male	☐ Female		
Person 5	☐ Male	☐ Female		
Person 6	☐ Male	☐ Female		
Person 7	☐ Male	☐ Female		

A4.   **What is your current legal marital status?**

☐ Single (that is never married)

☐ Married and separated from husband/wife

☐ Cohabiting

☐ Divorced

☐ Widowed

☐ Other (please specify) _____

A5.   **What age were you when you left school?**   Age: _____

A6.   **What did your education include?**

☐ No schooling

☐ Primary School education only

☐ Junior(or Inter) Certificate

☐ Leaving Certificate

☐ Vocational Training (please specify)_____

☐ Some third level education at college, university, RTC/IT

☐ Complete third level education at college, university, RTC/IT

A7.   **What type of accommodation do you live in?**

☐ Detached house

☐ Mid-Terrace house

☐ Semi-detached

☐ End-of-terrace house

☐ Apartment/Flat

☐ Other (please specify) _____

A8.   **Your home is …**

☐ Owned with mortgage

☐ Rented from the council

☐ Rented privately

☐ Owned outright

☐ Other (please specify)_____

A9.   **What is your nationality?** _____

A10.   **In general would you say your health is:**

☐ Excellent

☐ Very Good

☐ Good

☐ Fair

☐ Poor

A11.   **Do you have a long-term illness, health problem or disability?** ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, please specify:

_____

_____

Your illness or disability is: ☐ Temporary   ☐ Permanent

A12.   **Does any of your children have a long term illness or disability?**   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, please specify: _____

A13.   **How would you rate your Quality of Life?**

☐ Very poor

☐ Poor

☐ Neither poor nor good

☐Good

☐ Very Good

A14. **How would you rate the support in parenting you are getting from:**

	Very little support	Little support	Some support	A lot of support	Does not apply to me
Your child(ren)'s other parent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your parents	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your child(ren)'s other grandparents	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your older children	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other close relatives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your neighbours	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your childminder	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your counsellor	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Employer/boss	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Others in the workplace	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

A15. **Do you have the use of a car?**   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

A16. **Do you have access to public transport?**   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

A17. **How long does it take you to walk to your nearest bus stop from your home?**

☐ Less than 5 minutes

☐ Less than 10 minutes

☐ 10 minutes and more

A18. **How reliable would you rate your public transport?**

☐ Very Reliable

☐ Reliable

☐ Unreliable

☐ Very Unreliable

☐ Don't know

A19. **Which area of the City or County do you currently live in?**

_____

_____

A20: **Have you moved to another town or City since you became a one parent family?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, what were your reasons for moving?

_____

_____

_____

_____

B1. **Which of the activities below you are currently involved in?**

☐ Looking after the home or family

☐ Caring for a sick or disabled child

☐ Caring for a sick, elderly or disabled person

☐ In education

☐ On a training scheme

☐ Doing voluntary or unpaid work

☐ Working in a paid job as an employee or self employee

☐ Waiting to take up/ start a paid job

☐ Participating in Work Experience as part of a training scheme

☐ On maternity leave

☐ Other (please specify)_____

B2.　　**Please answer the following questions regarding:**

a)　　**Education, training and work**

	Yes	No
Have you ever registered with the local employment service or FAS?	☐	☐
Have you taken part in the Community Employment Scheme?	☐	☐
Have you ever taken part in a FAS Apprenticeship?	☐	☐
Have you ever completed a FAS training course?	☐	☐
Have you ever contacted any agencies about taking up training?	☐	☐
Would you know who to contact about starting education or training?	☐	☐
Have you ever contacted the Young Mothers in Education Project?	☐	☐
Have you looked for work in the last 12 months?	☐	☐

b) Difficulties when looking for employment

	Yes	No
Have you experienced literacy and/or numeracy difficulties when looking for employment?	☐	☐
Have you encountered racism when looking for employment?	☐	☐

B3. **In seeking to return to employment/training which agencies have you dealt with?**

Agency	Yes	No
Department of Social and Family Affairs	☐	☐
FAS	☐	☐
VEC	☐	☐
Galway Mayo Institute of Technology	☐	☐
NUI Galway	☐	☐
Galway City Partnership	☐	☐
Galway Rural Development	☐	☐
Údarás na Gaeltachta	☐	☐
Local Community Development Project	☐	☐
Local Family Resource Centre	☐	☐
Local Employment Service	☐	☐
Galway Resource Centre	☐	☐
Teagasc	☐	☐
Cumas Teo	☐	☐
Teen Parent Initiative	☐	☐
Other (please specify)_____	☐	☐

B4. Please rate how helpful you found these agencies:

Agency	Very helpful	Helpful	Not helpful	Very unhelpful	Not applicable
Department of Social and Family Affairs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
FAS	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
VEC	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Galway Mayo Institute of Technology	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
NUI Galway	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Galway City Partnership	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Galway Rural Development	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Údarás na Gaeltachta	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local Community Development Project	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local Family Resource Centre	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local Employment Service	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Galway Resource Centre	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teagasc	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cumas Teo	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teen Parent Initiative	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other (please specify) _____ _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

B5. How many years have you been in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment?

Years:_____

If you are currently in paid employment please go to Question C1.

If you are not currently in paid employment please continue with the questions below.

B6. **If you are not in paid employment at the moment which if any of the following would you like to happen to you over the next 3 years?**

Stay at home and look after my children	☐
Settle down with a new partner	☐
Have another child	☐
Get involved in full time education and training	☐
Get involved in part time education and training	☐
Do some voluntary work	☐
Get a part time paid job/ become self employed	☐
Get a full time paid job/ become self employed	☐
None of these	☐

B7. **Have you considered a particular job that you might want to do?**   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

B8. **If yes, what (kind of) job had you thought about?**

_____

B9. **When thinking about paid employment, are the following a big issue, small issue or not an issue for you in your current situation?**

	A big issue	A small issue	Not an issue
I have difficulties due to my health condition	☐	☐	☐
I have difficulties due to my disability	☐	☐	☐
I am not sure I would be better off financially in work than I am on the One Parent Family Payment	☐	☐	☐
My parent(s) would not like it if I worked	☐	☐	☐
I would have problems with transport to and from work	☐	☐	☐
My ex partner/spouse would not like me working	☐	☐	☐
My confidence is low at the moment	☐	☐	☐
I do not have the qualifications or experience to get the kind of job I would want	☐	☐	☐
Employers are not very family friendly	☐	☐	☐
There are few suitable education and training opportunities in the local area	☐	☐	☐
I want to look after my child(ren) myself	☐	☐	☐
I would need a job where I could take time off at short notice to look after my child/children	☐	☐	☐
I care for someone who has a health condition, disability or behavioral difficulties	☐	☐	☐
I am not prepared to leave my child(ren) in the care of anyone other than my family or close friends while I work	☐	☐	☐
My child/children would not like me to work	☐	☐	☐
There are few suitable job opportunities in the local area	☐	☐	☐
There is not enough suitable, affordable childcare around here	☐	☐	☐
I have personal or family troubles that need to be sorted out	☐	☐	☐
I am concerned about the leaving the security of the One Parent Family Payment	☐	☐	☐
My family or close friends are not able or live too far away to provide childcare	☐	☐	☐
I am worried I will not have enough time with my children	☐	☐	☐

B10: **Apart from the issues covered in the previous question, is there anything else that is a big issue for you in deciding about taking up paid employment?**

If yes, please specify:

_____

B11. Different people have different priorities at different times in their lives. Which of the following are your priorities over the next few years?

Staying at home and bringing up my children	☐
Looking after a sick or disabled child	☐
Looking after a sick, disabled or elderly family member	☐
Managing my own health condition/disability	☐
Managing my drug or alcohol problem	☐
Emotionally coming to terms with the break up of my relationship	☐
Sorting out financial issues relating to the break up of my relationship	☐
Sorting out custody/access issues for my children	☐
Building/maintaining a good relationship with my family	☐
Getting somewhere permanent to live	☐
Getting some or more qualifications	☐
Doing some voluntary work	☐
Building my self confidence	☐
None of these	☐

B12. Apart from the issues listed above, is there anything else that is a priority for you over the next few years?

If yes, please specify:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

B13. Have you ever been in paid employment?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

B14. What year did you leave your last job?: _____

B15. What was your job title in your last job? _____

B18. Was you last job

☐ Part Time (less than 20 hours a week)

☐ Full Time (20 or more hours a week)

B19. **Before you would consider taking up paid employment, how old would your youngest child have to be?**

Years:_____

If you are currently involved in education and/or training please go to Question D1.

If you are currently in paid employment please answer the following questions.

C1. **How long have you been working in this current job?**

Years:_____Months:_____

C2. **Is this job:**

☐ Part Time (less than 20 hours a week)

☐ Full Time (20 or more hours a week)

C3. **What is your job title?**

Job Title**:** _____

C4. **When you returned to/started work, what made it possible for you to do so?**

_____

_____

_____

C5.   **Who is looking after your child(ren) on most days that you are working?**

   (Multiple answers possible – please tick all boxes applicable to you)

Your parents	☐
Your child(ren)'s other parent	☐
Other close relatives	☐
A close friend	☐
A child minder	☐
Child(ren) looked after in crèche	☐
Child(ren) looked after in school	☐
Child(ren) looked after in pre-school or Montessori	☐
Child(ren) old enough to take care of themselves outside of school hours	☐
Other (please specify)_____	☐

C6.   **People who work can sometimes find it hard to stay in their job. How easy or difficult is it for you to stay in your current job?**

   ☐ Very Difficult

   ☐ Difficult

   ☐ Neither easy nor difficult

   ☐ Easy

   ☐ Very Easy

C7. **When thinking about your current situation are the following a big issue, small issue or not an issue for you being able to stay in a job?**

	A big issue	A small Issue	Not an issue
I have problems with transport to and from work	☐	☐	☐
I am worried I do not have enough time with my children	☐	☐	☐
I am not sure that I am financially better off in work	☐	☐	☐
I had not anticipated all the extra things I would need to spend money on now that I am in work	☐	☐	☐
I have difficulties working due to my health condition/disability	☐	☐	☐
My child/children do not like me working	☐	☐	☐
My ex partner/spouse does not like me working	☐	☐	☐
My parents do not like me working	☐	☐	☐
My confidence has taken a knock since I started working	☐	☐	☐
There is not enough suitable, affordable childcare around here	☐	☐	☐
My child(ren) is/are not happy in childcare while I am at work	☐	☐	☐
I am not confident my childcare arrangements will continue	☐	☐	☐
My employer is not very family friendly	☐	☐	☐
I am finding it difficult to adjust to having money coming in every month rather than every week	☐	☐	☐
There is a lot of pressure in my current job to work longer hours, stay late or do overtime	☐	☐	☐
I find it stressful combining work and family life	☐	☐	☐
I cannot see this job going anywhere, no promotion prospects	☐	☐	☐
I am not enjoying working as much as I thought I would	☐	☐	☐

C8. **Apart from the issues listed above is there anything else that is a big issue for you staying in work at the moment?**

If yes, please specify: _____

If you are currently involved in education or training please answer the following questions.

D1. **How long have you been in this current education or training programme?** Years:_____Months:_____

D2. **Is this course or training:**

☐ Part Time (less than 20 hours a week)

☐ Full Time (20 or more hours a week)

D3. **What is the full title of this course or training programme?**

_____

D4. **Whereabouts in City /County are you studying this course?**

_____

D5. **The course is provided by:**

FAS	☐
Youthreach	☐
Teen Parent Initiative	☐
VEC	☐
NUI Galway	☐
Galway Mayo Institute of Technology	☐
Young Mothers in Education Project	☐
Other (please specify) _____	☐

D6. **When you returned to/started education and/or training, what made it possible for you to do so?**

_____

_____

_____

D7. **Who is looking after your child(ren) on most days when you are in training/education?**

(Multiple answers possible – please tick all boxes applicable to you)

Your parents	☐
Your child(ren)'s other parent	☐
Other close relatives	☐
A close friend	☐
A child minder	☐
Child(ren) looked after in crèche	☐
Child(ren) looked after in school	☐
Child(ren) looked after in pre-school or Montessori	☐
Child(ren) old enough to take care of themselves outside of school hours	☐
Other (please specify)_____	☐

D8: **People who take up education and training can sometimes find it hard to stay involved in their course. How easy or difficult is it for you to stay in your current training or education programme?**

☐ Very Difficult

☐ Difficult
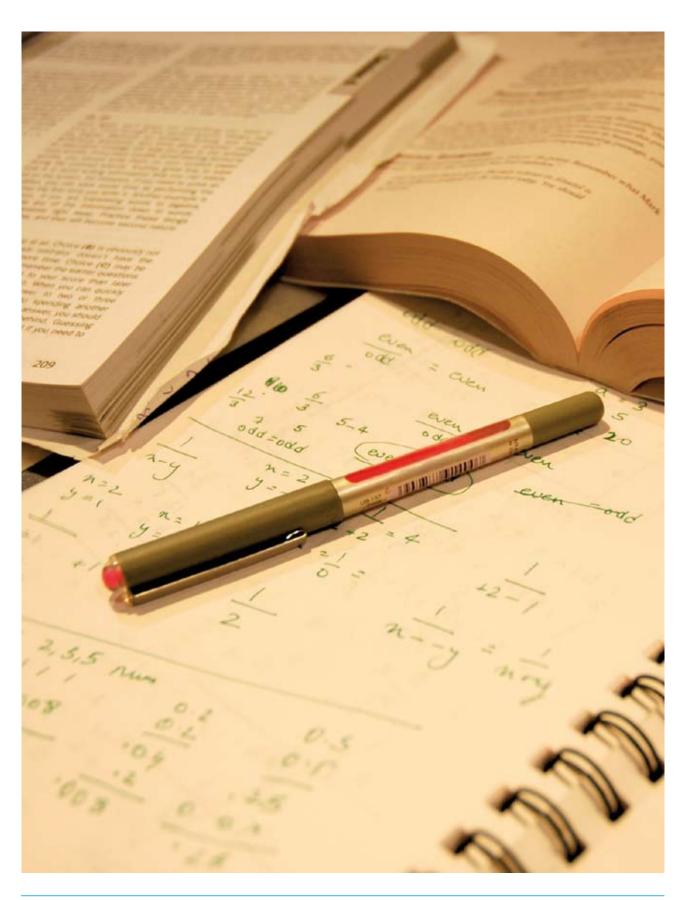
☐ Neither easy nor difficult

☐ Easy

☐ Very Easy

D9. When thinking about your current situation, are the following a big issue, small issue or not an issue for you being able to stay in your current training or education programme?

	A big issue	A small issue	Not an issue
I have problems with transport to and from the training centre	☐	☐	☐
I am worried I do not have enough time with my children	☐	☐	☐
I am not sure that I am financially better off in education/training	☐	☐	☐
I had not anticipated all the extra things I would need to spend money on now that I am in education/training	☐	☐	☐
I have difficulties in education/training due to my health condition/disability	☐	☐	☐
My child/children do not like me being in education/training	☐	☐	☐
My ex partner/ spouse does not like me being in education/training	☐	☐	☐
My parents do not like me working being in education/training	☐	☐	☐
My confidence has taken a knock since I began education/training	☐	☐	☐
There is not enough suitable, affordable childcare around here	☐	☐	☐
My child/children are not happy in childcare while I am in education/training	☐	☐	☐
I am not happy with the childcare my child(ren) is/are receiving while I am in education/training	☐	☐	☐
I am not confident my childcare arrangements will continue	☐	☐	☐
My education/training is not very family friendly	☐	☐	☐
I need guided support with preparing assignments and projects	☐	☐	☐
I find it stressful combining being in education/training and family life	☐	☐	☐
I cannot see the point in being in being in education/training there are no job opportunities	☐	☐	☐
I am not enjoying being in education/training as much as I thought I would	☐	☐	☐

D10. Apart from the issues listed above, is there anything else that is a big issue for you staying in education/training at the moment?

If yes, please specify: _____

_____

_____

Thank you very much for your time!

PRIZE ENTRY FORM

In order to be in with a chance to win one of our One4All vouchers, please fill in your contact details below. The draw will be held on May 17th 2007 and all winners will be notified by post.

Prizes Include:

1st Prizes €250 worth of One4All vouchers

2nd Prizes €150 worth of One4All vouchers

3rd Prizes €100 worth of One4All vouchers

When you have filled in your details, simply put this form and your completed questionnaire in to the Free Post envelope and send it back to us. When we open the envelope the form will immediately be placed into the draw box and your questionnaire will be anonymous. No connection will be made between the questionnaire and this form

Thank you for taking part in this survey.

NAME _____

ADDRESS_____

_____

_____

PHONE _____

EMAIL _____

As part of this study we will be carrying out one-on-one interviews.

If you would like to take part in this, please tick the box.

YES, I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE PART IN AN INTERVIEW.   ❏

Interview Guide for One Parent Family Interviews

Qualitative Interview

For One Parent Family Adult in Education/Training

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself (and your children)?
    (These are some prompts if you get stuck)

    • What is life like for you?

    • Tell me about yourself?

    • What is your nationality?

    • How old are you?

    • How old are your children and what are their names?

    • How would you describe your health at the moment?

    • Have you always parented alone?
      (If not what was your situation prior to now?)

2. What does a typical day involve for you?

3. What were the barriers for you in entering education/training?

4. What supports did you get or who supported you when you took up education/training?

5. What challenges are there / or what makes it difficult for you to remain in education/training?

6. Have you made new friendships or formed acquaintances with people as a result of being in education/training?

7. What kind of hobbies / interests do you have? What do you do in your spare time?

8. What does your children/child think about you being in education/training?

9. What do your family and friends (children) think about you being in education/training?

10. How has being in education/training changed the way you parent and how do you manage? Give examples (good & bad)

11. Can I ask you what your childcare arrangements are and how much does this cost you relative to your own financial circumstances?

12. What benefits other than OPFP are you in receipt of for example do you receive rent supplement?

13. Did you lose any benefits when you took up education/training?

14. What do your family and friends (children) think about you being in education/training?

15. What are your plans for the next couple of years? What are your personal long term goals?

16. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Qualitative Interview

For One Parent Family Adult Working

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself (and your children)?

• What is life like for you?

• Tell me about yourself?

• What is your nationality?

• How old are you?

• How old are your children and what are their names?

• How would you describe your health at the moment?

• Have you always parented alone?

    (If not what was your situation prior to now?)

2. What does a typical day involve for you?

3. What were the barriers for you in entering employment?

4. What supports did you get or who supported you when you took up employment?

5. What challenges are there / or what makes it difficult for you to remain in employment?

6. Have you made new friendships or formed acquaintances with people as a result of being in employment?

7. What kind of hobbies / interests do you have? What do you do in your spare time? How do you socialise?

8. What does your children/child think about you being in employment?

9. What do your family and friends (children) think about you being in employment?

10. How has working outside the home changed the way you parent and how do you manage? Give examples (good and bad?)

11. Can I ask you what your childcare arrangements are and how much does this cost you relative to your own financial circumstances?

12. What benefits other than OPFP are you in receipt of for example do you receive rent supplement?

13. Did you lose any benefits when you took up employment?

14. What are you personal long term goals or what are your plans for the next couple of years?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Qualitative Interview

For One Parent Family Adult At Home

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself (and your children)?

   (*These are some prompts if you get stuck*)

- What is life like for you?

- Tell me about yourself?

- What is your nationality?

- How old are you?

- How old are your children and what are their names?

- How would you describe your health at the moment?

- Have you always parented alone?

   (*If not what was your situation prior to now?*)

2. What does a typical day involve for you?

3. Do you socialise outside the home?

   How do you socialise?

   What interests or hobbies do you have?

4. Since you became a parent have ever been in employment or education/training? Can you tell me how you found that experience? Challenges/barriers/supports?

5. Have you ever though about returning to employment/ education/ training?

   What has prevented you from returning to employment/ education/ training?

6. What do you think your family and friends would think about you working outside the home?

7. What would your family and friends (children) think about you being in education/training/employment?

8. How do you think employment/ education/ training would affect the way you parent and how would you manage? Give examples

9. What benefits other than OPFP are you in receipt of for example do you receive rent supplement?

10. What are you personal long term goals or what are your plans for the next couple of years?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Please look at the list of agencies on the card have you ever engaged with any of these agencies and if so what was your experience like?

- Department of Social and Family Affairs

- Community Welfare Officer

- FAS

- VEC

- Galway Mayo Institute of Technology

- NUI Galway

- Galway City Partnership

- Galway Rural Development

- Údarás na Gaeltachta

- Local Community Development Project

- Local Family Resource Centre

- Teagasc

- Cumas Teo

- Teen Parent Initiative

- Galway County Council

- Galway City Council

- Other (please specify)

APPENDIX IV

Agencies participants of this study have engaged with and their remit

Community Development Projects

Community Development projects are community based local resource centres which provide a focal point for community development activities and to other specialised community development projects. They are administered by the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The projects work to address all areas of poverty and disadvantage. Projects are concerned with the needs of women and children, those with disabilities, the homeless, one parent families, the elderly, the unemployed, young people at risk, Travellers, and other disadvantaged groups. There are approximately 181 projects participating in the Programme.

The services provided and activities supported by local projects include:

- the provision of information, advice and support to particular target groups e.g. Unemployed people, one parent families, Travellers, youth, young families, the elderly;

- undertaking special projects with some groups;

- practical assistance to community groups e.g. photocopying, facilities, training, information and advice;

- provision of adult education courses and training opportunities;

- support for local enterprise and job creation initiatives;

- identification of policy issues arising from the work of the projects and support for participation in local development initiatives.

Cumas Teo

Cumas Teo is an area-based partnership company located in Connemara in the west of County Galway. The primary work of the organisation is to advise and provide support to children and young people at risk of leaving school early, and their parents. It also provides career guidance for those in school and can arrange access to a psychological service.

Family Resource Centres

Sponsored by the Family Support Agency, Family Resource Centres are located around the country. Their remit is to assist communities in meeting their needs through the provision of information, advice and support for target groups. They also provide education courses and training opportunities, provide childcare for those attending such courses. They also run after school clubs.

FÁS

FÁS is the state employment and training agency. It has over 80 offices and training centres around the country which are responsible for assisting those looking for work; it provides training and employment courses for those out of work, advises industry and supports a number of community enterprises.

Galway City Council

The main interaction Galway City Council has with One Parent Families is through their role as housing providers. They provide housing for individuals and families who cannot secure it through their own resources. Houses are allocated through means of the 'Housing List'. Galway City Council is also responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of their rented housing stock.

Galway City Partnership

Galway City Partnership is an area-based partnership company which works towards the design and implementation of new and innovative programmes, policies and practices to help tackle unemployment, social exclusion, discrimination and inequality. It is charged with delivering the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) on behalf of the Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs under the auspices of POBAL. Programmes have a variety of funding sources and currently include the Local Employment Service Network (LESN) funded by FAS.

Galway County Council

The main interaction Galway County Council has with One Parent Families is through their role as housing providers. They provide housing for individuals and families who cannot secure it through their own resources. Houses are allocated through means of the 'Housing List'. Galway County Council is also responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of their rented housing stock.

Galway Mayo Institute of Technology

Galway Mayo Institute of Technology is a third level organisation in Galway City providing a variety of supports to students enrolled, including financial assistance, guidance, counselling and careers advice, and a parent-baby support group.

Galway Rural Development

Galway Rural Development Company is a partnership between statutory and voluntary groups and the social partners. The company administers the Social Inclusion Programme under the LEADER programme. It has a remit in the area of Community Development and also provides a range of Enterprise supports A Mediation service for the unemployed and administers the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme. In the field of education GRD provides supports particularly in designated RAPID and CLÁR areas. Other initiatives include the Homestart Programme and the management of the Rural Social Scheme.

Health Service Executive Community Welfare Services

The Community Welfare Services are administered by the HSE. Community Welfare Officers are responsible for administering the Supplementary Welfare Allowances, although this scheme is funded by the DSFA. Other allowances administered by the service include rent supplement, medical cards, diet and heating supplements and the back to school clothing and footwear allowance.

NUI Galway

NUI Galway is a third-level institution providing a range of educational programmes and courses at various levels, certificate, diploma, degree and postgraduate. Through its student services is assists students in providing a range of supports, including guidance, financial assistance, mentoring, emotional support and crèche facilities.

Teagasc

Teagasc is a state-sponsored body charged with conducting research and providing training programmes to the agricultural and food industry workers and rural communities. In particular they provide a variety of training programmes ranging from certificate to third level qualification standards.

Teen Parent Initiative

The Teen Parent Initiative operates out of University College Hospital Galway. It is a service aimed at young parents or soon-to-be parents which provides support, generally and in the use of services. It also aims to provide support to those parents who wish to continue or pursue training and education opportunities.

The Department of Social and Family Affairs

The DSFA is responsible for formulating social policies and also administers and manages the delivery of statutory and non-statutory schemes and services. The Department's structure is divided between a national and local function. On the national level the **Aireacht** is responsible for the overall management of the Department and for the formulation of the social policies. On a local level the **Social Welfare Services** are responsible for the day-to-day administration and management of social welfare schemes and services. This service is delivered through a network of local, regional and headquarters offices. The regional structure is based on eight regions with offices in Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Dundalk and two in the Dublin area. The Department is responsible for the delivery of a range of social insurance and social assistance schemes including provision for unemployment, illness, maternity, caring, widowhood, retirement and old age and the One Parent Family Payment (http://www.welfare.ie/about/overview.html).

Back to Education Allowance

Persons in receipt of One Parent Family Payment are eligible, subject, to certain conditions, to participate in the Back to Education Programme. Under this Programme, a person in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment may take up approved education while retaining social welfare payments. Certain criteria has to be satisfied in order for parents to receive this benefit and these include, that if they are under 21, they must be 2 years out of education, those over the age of 21 must be in receipt of One Parent Family Payment for at least 6 months (in the case of second level courses) or at least 12 months (in the case of third level courses).

The Back to Education Allowance payment is equivalent to the maximum One Parent Family Payment and also provides parents with a Book Allowance of €400. Recipients can also maintain secondary and supplementary benefits which are outlined above. Where an individual is on a reduced rate One Parent Family Payment it is increased to the full rate when on Back to Education and a Book Allowance of €400 is also of available. As the allowance is not means tested a person may work to supplement their income however, persons in receipt of Back to Education Allowance are not eligible for Family Income Supplement (FIS). Persons in receipt of Back to Education Allowance are not eligible to participate in a Community Employment Scheme, Social Economy Programme, Rural Social Scheme or any other FÁS/Fáilte Ireland Training Programme. Parents who fail to complete, or who drop out of a course will not be permitted on to the scheme to pursue a different course unless the Department is satisfied that certain circumstances pertain (http://www.welfare.ie/foi/bte_all.html).

Back to Work Allowance

The Back to Work Allowance can be paid, subject to certain conditions, instead of One Parent Family Payment when a recipient commences work. A person must have been in receipt of One-Parent Family Payment for 15 months. The Back to Work Allowance is reduces the One Parent Family Payment in stages as follows,

- 75% of One-Parent Family Payment entitlement for the first year

- 50% of One-Parent Family Payment entitlement for the second year

- 25% of One-Parent Family Payment entitlement for the third year.

During this three year period recipients do not pay tax or PRSI on their social welfare payment. Recipients can also retain their secondary benefits such as fuel allowance, medical card, rent and mortgage interest supplement, diet supplement and Back to

School Clothing and Footwear Allowance for 3 years as long as their household income is less than €317.43 gross per week (http://www.welfare.ie/publications/sw93.html).

Back to Work Enterprise Allowance

Back to Work Enterprise Allowance is available to people in receipt of the One-Parent Family Payment who become self employed. This allowance is paid instead of One Parent Family Payment and is subject to certain conditions, including that the person has to have been in receipt of One Parent Family Payment for 12 months and that they are setting up a self-employment business which has been approved, in writing, in advance by a Partnership Company or a Social Family Support Services Facilitator.

The allowance is payable on a reducing scale over a four year period

- 100% of a persons social welfare payment in year one,

- 75% in year two,

- 50% in year three and

- 25% in year four.

Income from this type of self-employment is not assessed as means/income. A person in receipt of Back to Work Enterprise Allowance can retain secondary benefits such as Fuel Allowance and Christmas Bonus. Supplementary Welfare allowance payments such as rent allowance, Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, medical card can also be retained while receiving the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance. Both secondary and supplementary welfare payments can only be retained as long the gross household income is less than €317.43 per week (http://www.welfare.ie/foi/btw_eall.html).

Family Income Supplement

A person in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment and who is working may be entitled to the Family Income Supplement (FIS). Certain conditions apply in relation to hours of work and duration of employment. The One Parent Family Payment is assessable as means.

The FIS payment is 60% of the difference between the person's average weekly family income and the income limit for their family size, rounded up to the nearest euro. FIS is usually paid for 52 weeks as long as the person continues to meet the FIS qualifying conditions. At the end of the 52 weeks, a person must re-apply for FIS. Those in receipt of the Back to Work Allowance may also qualify for FIS if they meet certain criteria (http://www.welfare.ie/publications/sw22.html).

Rent Supplement

Rent Supplement is paid to people living in private residential accommodation who cannot provide for the cost of their accommodation from their own resources. In order to qualify a person must have been assessed by a Housing Authority and classified as having a housing need. Generally, if a household's only income is a social welfare or Health Services Executive (HSE) payment, the person will qualify for a Rent Supplement. Those in full-time employment (working for 30 hours a week or more) do not qualify for Rent Supplement.

This maximum rent level is set by the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the HSE may set lower rates within these limits. The Department of Social and Family Affairs has no function in deciding entitlement in individual cases. In Galway, the rent caps are as follows,

Family Size	Rent Supplement Rate
One parent family with 1 child	€175 per week/ €758 approx. per month
One parent family with 2 children	€200 per week/ €867 approx. per month
One parent family with 3 children	€245 per week/ €1062 approx. per week

The amount of Rent Supplement will be calculated by the HSE's Community Welfare Officer (CWO) and will generally ensure that a person's income, after paying rent, does not fall below a minimum level. A person must pay €13 towards their rent and also a contribution for each of their dependent children. If a person's actual rent is higher than the local maximum, they may be refused Rent Supplement entirely.

In order to qualify a person's gross income (excluding any payments under Back to Work Allowance or Family Income Supplement) must not exceed €317.43 per week. In regards to income, maintenance payments up to €95.23 per week are assessed in full and any maintenance between €95.23 and €170.23 is not taken into account. Additionally, 25% of all maintenance over €170.23 is also not taken into account

(http://www.oneparent.ie/pdfs/9_OPEN%20Statement%20on%20Rent%20Supplement%20and%20Lone%20Parents.pdf;http://www.welfare.ie/foi/swa_rentmort.html#1; http://www.citizensinformation.ie/categories/social-welfare/social-welfare-payments/supplementary-welfare-schemes/rent_supplement).

The One Parent Family Payment

The One Payment Family Payment is a means-tested payment. Eligibility is governed by a number of criteria: the recipient must be widowed, separated, unmarried, divorced or be the spouse of a prisoner. In addition the recipient must care for, and have in their charge at least one child who is residing with them; be habitually resident in the state; not be cohabiting with a husband, wife or partner and not be in receipt of income exceeding €400 per week (this figure applies since May 2007). The OPFP will be reduced on a sliding scale up to the income limit of €400. A person who claims One-Parent Family Payment is also required to seek maintenance from her/his spouse or the other parent of their child. Maintenance payments are then assessed as means. Vouched housing costs of up to €95.23 per week (rent or mortgage) may be offset against maintenance payments with half the balance of maintenance being assessed as means in order to establish the rate of One-Parent Family Payment due (http://www.welfare.ie/foi/onepfp.html#part1).

Údarás na Gaeltachta

Údarás na Gaeltachta is an organisation devoted to the economic and cultural development of Gaeltacht area and the maintenance of the Irish language in these areas. It offers a number of training and education development schemes to enable individuals to reside in Gaeltacht areas and add to their economic status. Such schemes include apprenticeships and industrial scholarships, as well as support schemes for courses provided by community groups.

Vocational Educational Committees (VEC)

In Galway there are two VECs: City of Galway VEC and County Galway VEC. The VECs provide educational courses and aim to ensure that these courses are socially inclusive. They offer a range of courses which cater for a wide scope of educational capabilities. These include the Back to Education Initiative, Youthreach, VTOS, and Community Education. They also provide students with grants to help fund their education at agencies within and outside of the VEC. Childcare grants are also available for parents who chose to take up a VEC run course. The City of Galway VEC also provides the Galway Adult Based Education Service and the Adult Learner Guidance Service. County Galway VEC offers Post-Leaving Certificate courses, Outdoor Education and has Traveller Training Centres throughout the County. (http://www.cgvec.ie/Services/AdultFurtherEducation/ http://www.countygalwayvec.com/index.html).

Young Mothers in Education

Young Mothers in Education is an information and support group for young mothers and expectant young mothers who plan on returning, or are in education and wish to progress further or onto to training programmes. It provides information and individual support to parents or parents-to-be, helping them identify the best path towards achieving their goals. It also provides grinds to those in need and hosts a weekly a group support meeting where parents can exchange ideas, information and support each other.

Appendix V

Interview Guide for Local Service Providers

1. Tell me about your organisation – what it does, how it does it, and for whom?

2. Do you interact with those parenting alone specifically, or as part of a wider group? (if part of a wider group how do you address one parent issues?

3. Briefly – and from you organisation's perspective – what are main issues facing one parent families in Galway (City and County) today?

4. What are the most important programmes/services available with regard to OPFs and labour market need?

5. What are the major strengths of the current range of programmes available (feel free to speak generally, or specifically on aspects of one or more programmes)?

6. What are the major weaknesses of the current range of programmes available (feel free to speak generally, or specifically on aspects of one or more programmes)?

7. Could you outline how you see your organisation serving the needs of OPFs?

8. From a *service* perspective, who do you think are the main actors (organisational or individual) that play a role in the OPF arena in Galway City and County?

9. Where do you see your organisation fitting in to this cluster of groups?

10. What is their relative status to each other?

    Is there a hierarchy of organisations – real or perceived – and are there issues here around potential capture of process?

11. What do you think is your organisation's greatest strength in providing services for OPFs? Could it be improved?

12. What do you think is your organisation's greatest weakness in providing services to OPFs?

13. Do you think there is an alternative to the current method of delivering services to OPFs?

14. From a *Policy* perspective, who do you see as the main actors (organisational or individual) that play a role in the OPF arena (governmental, social partners, Voluntary & Community sector)?

15. What is your knowledge of the government's policy orientation towards OPFs?

16. What do you think the impact on the parent will be?

17. What do you think the impact on parenting itself will be?

18. What do you think the impact on the child/children will be?

19. What is the envisaged role of the voluntary and community sector in implementing this new policy?

20. Has your organisation participated in many collaborative processes, for example, partnership arrangements, County/City Development Boards etc?

21. Do you consider them to be a success in relation to their goals? If so, Why? If not, why not?

22. Do you perceive any benefits/problems accruing from being involved in such bodies?

23. Do you perceive any benefits accruing from participating in collaborative approaches to service provision for OPFs?

24. How do you think such collaboration could be improved?

25. Do you perceive any potential negatives accruing from NOT being involved in such an approach?

26. What benefits/safeguards does your organisation enjoy from its position as identified?

Appendix VI

Interview Guide for National Policy Actors

Where did the impetus come from to write the discussion document *Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents*?

1. What were the major influences in drawing up these proposals (for example, how cognisant was the group of developments (potential or actual) in other countries; was the NESC document *The Developmental Welfare State* a major consideration)?

2. To what extent were budgetary issues an influencing factor?

3. Is there a cross-departmental working group or steering group in existence to further drive this process?

4. How would you characterise the interaction with other relevant actors in the lead up to the proposals (for example, was a process of consultation - with service providers, service users, other actors like social partners – put in place, and to what extent did the group address particular concerns raised? Could you give examples?)

5. How would describe the envisaged implementation process? Have you discussed the proposals with service providers, agencies, service users at national and/or local level?

6. In relation to the envisaged implementation process, how punitive is non-participation by service providers going to be, if at all?

7. In relation to the proposals, to what extent is employment prioritised over other interventions, for example education?

8. Specifically, why is the age of 5 identified as being the starting point for activation, and 7 years of age identified as a 'cut-off' point as such for the OPF payment?

9. What do you anticipate the impact of these proposals will be on children?

10. Specifically, what is the anticipated impact on child poverty?

11. What is the anticipated impact on the parent?

12. What is the anticipated impact on parenting?

13. To what extent was the constitution considered when drawing up these proposals?

14. How do see the proposals impacting on different socio-economic groups?

15. There are many facets to these proposals? In relation to joined-up government, is this an all-or-nothing policy, i.e. are there certain things which will have to be in place for this proposal to be fully implemented?

16. Is there a discretionary aspect to these proposals, i.e. those who are carers, those who are suffering from illness themselves?

(Footnotes) 1. As Millar observes definitions of lone parenthood differ by age of child (ranging from under 18 in France and Germany, under 15 in Austria and Ireland and under 20 in Japan. Nor is it clear how or whether women on parental or maternity leave are counted in such figures.

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