

‘Towards A better Future’.

Report highlights challenges facing one parent families in their quest to return to work

A new research report published by Galway City Partnership and the One Parent Family Research Steering Group has found that those parenting alone want to return to work but face significant barriers in their efforts to access employment, training and education.

The research, undertaken in Galway City and County by the NUI Galway Child and Family Research Centre, was launched today in Galway by Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Éamon Ó Cuív T.D.

Dr Michelle Millar who headed the research team from the Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway said, “The research clearly shows a willingness on the part of these parents to work outside the home. Yet their decision to do so is affected both by their concerns surrounding how going out to work will impact on their children, and being able to find suitable, part time flexible employment. Also the lack of affordable and accessible childcare, and the poverty trap created by the rent supplement mean that for many of those who parent alone, finding work that leaves them financially better off is extremely difficult.”

The research is the first of its kind in Ireland and took place in the context of major proposed policy changes. The Government Discussion Paper: *Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents* suggests that policy changes are likely to involve major reform in welfare support for those parenting alone. The proposals would incorporate conditionality in payment, with those parenting alone expected to begin connecting to the labour market as their children approach the upper age limit for payment of the Parental Allowance.

Speaking at the launch, Elaine Harvey, Chair of the One Parent Family Research Steering Group said, “The parents view themselves, first and foremost, as primary carers for their children, and because of their circumstances, affordable childcare and a flexible attitude from employers are just as important as getting an actual job. It is clear from the research that those parenting alone want to work – the challenge for all of us is to identify with parents their individual blocks to employment, education and training, and then to develop realistic pathways to overcoming the obstacles identified. We believe that this activation process should be voluntary and note that 46% of those who participated in the survey had looked for work in the past 12 months.”

Minister Ó Cuív said, “Lone parents face many challenges in today’s society of which returning to the workplace is just one. This research will help inform policy makers and indeed employers about the particular challenges facing lone parents and ways in which they can be helped.”

The research was undertaken to address the lack of reliable information about the reality of life for those parenting alone in Galway City and County. It included interviews and questionnaires with parents, policy makers and service providers and found that poverty and child wellbeing will only be addressed if the family’s financial situation improves as a result of going back to work.

Declan Brassil, Galway City Partnership Manager said, “One of the primary barriers is the lack of flexible employment which will result in increased income. Parents encounter difficulties in securing flexible, high quality, well paid employment which is part-time and family friendly, and takes account of school hours and school holidays. This is even more difficult for those parents located in rural areas. The report recommends that employers should be consulted in order to understand the demand for flexible, part-time work and that local employers be encouraged to engage with the One Parent Family Research Steering Group.”

The report found that additional, affordable, community based childcare facilities should be provided, and creative ways in which care can be provided outside the home for older children and young adolescents need to be explored and fostered.

Parents want to engage in training and education but it needs to be at a time that suits them and their children, with a preference for part-time courses run locally while children are in school. Parents living in rural areas need training to take place locally. Education and training providers should explore the possibility of including work placement or supervised work experience which would support individuals in their role as parents.

Some parents found dealing with organisations and agencies quite difficult as they were not forthcoming with information about entitlements and services, although a number of participants spoke of having a positive experience when dealing with statutory service providers. The report recommends that a booklet and internet site containing information for those parenting alone be published, and distributed by the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) to all those currently in receipt of One Parent Family Payment (OPFP). The booklet and site should contain information regarding benefits, entitlements, education and training opportunities, supports for re-entering the labour market, and all relevant contact details for agencies who work with those parenting alone.

Locally based support groups in Galway City and County should be established where those parenting alone can support one another in a non-judgmental and positive environment.

Differences between the experiences of urban and rural lone parents were also found. These centred largely around access and mobility as many jobs, services and educational programmes are based in Galway City and larger towns in County Galway making it more difficult for lone parents living in rural areas. It also found that social support networks are vital, with grandparents and other family members playing an important support role for many lone parents.

The survey was sent to the 3,144 recipients of the One Parent Family Payment in Galway City and County and 676 (22%) were returned.

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