



POLICY SUBMISSION

Lone Parents, Labour Market Policy and the Community Employment Programme

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1. Introduction

The terms of reference of the working group on the tax/welfare treatment of households includes 'an examination of the income support arrangements attached to labour market programmes, with particular emphasis on the Community Employment (CE) programme'. Issues arising from the interplay of CE earnings and the new One Parent Family Payment have been considered in position papers by both the Department of Social Welfare and the Department of Enterprise and Employment. DEE has also proposed that the group prepare an interim report addressing some of these issues in the context of the forthcoming Budget.

This document outlines the views of the Combat Poverty Agency on these issues.¹ It has three main elements: a profile of lone parents, including their employment status; a review of labour market policy as it relates to lone parents; and an examination of the issues arising from lone parents' participation in CE. The key points of the paper are:

- lone parents are a small but growing segment of the population, whose socio-economic status is very disadvantaged, with low participation in the labour market;
- in recent years, lone parents have benefited from the more general shift towards active labour market policies for unemployed and socially excluded groups;
- for lone parents, CE is the 'flagship' in this policy approach, as reflected in the rapid increase in their participation on this programme (7,000 or 17 per cent of total);
- the relative income gains for lone parents on CE are exaggerated due to hidden child-care costs and comparisons with other CE and low paid workers;
- the limited progression of lone parents from CE reflects both financial (poverty trap) and labour market (low placement rates) factors;
- reform should be twofold: first, enhance labour market supports, including child-care, for lone parents; second, make net income under CE (and other low paid work) more neutral with regard to household and welfare status by integrating tax and welfare.

Recent policy has been clearly directed at improving the employment prospects of lone parents, as part of a general refocusing of public policy on long-term unemployment and social exclusion. The issues arising from lone parent participation in CE should be seen in the context of wider policy debates regarding active labour market programmes and welfare-to-work transition. It is therefore crucial that policy decisions pertaining to CE are not be taken in an ad-hoc and reactive manner in response to apparent anomalies. Otherwise, the important social advances for lone parents could be seriously undermined.

2. Profile of lone parents

2.1 *lone parent population*

The 1996 Census recorded 72,465 lone parents, the vast majority of whom are women (86 per cent).² Slightly over a third (35 per cent) of lone parent families consist of one

¹The paper was curtailed by the absence of data in respect to the nature and extent of lone parents' employment and participation in labour market programmes, along with the cost of various reform options.

²Defined as a non-cohabiting parent with at least one child aged up to 19 years. There are a further 56,500 lone parents whose children are aged over 19 years, giving an overall total of 129,000.

child. Lone parents account for 14.6 per cent of all families with at least one child aged up to 19 years, increasing to almost a quarter (24.3 per cent) for families with only one child. Figures for receipt of lone parent-related welfare payments provide an administrative measure of lone parenthood. In 1996, the combined figure was 69,774, comprising 50,557 on Lone Parent's Allowance (LPA), 9,257 in receipt of Widow's/Widower's Contributory Pension and 10,060 on Deserted Wife's Benefit.^{3 4} The annual rate of increase in lone parents in receipt of welfare payments is between 8 and 10 percent. This growth reflects demographic trends and changes in the eligibility criteria for lone parent payments, such as expanded coverage, eg to include male lone parents, and easier means tests, as with the new OPFP. (Some recipients would also have transferred from other welfare payments, eg Unemployment Assistance, Widow's/Widower's Contributory Pension.) The main demographic factors contributing to the growth in lone parenthood are twofold: an on-going rise in non-marital births and an increase in marital breakdown. The data suggests that these factors have equal importance, though the type of family (age, size) formed under each differs significantly (McCashin, 1997). Demographic patterns and administrative changes are reflected in differential rates of increase across the various types of lone parent payment, with recipients of Widow's/Widower's Pension and Deserted Wife's Benefit being largely unchanged, while dependency on LPA/OPFP increased from 40,581 in 1994 to 55,502 in June 1997, a rise of over a third.

2.2 *socio-demographic characteristics*

McCashin (1997) provides the most indepth analysis of lone parents, based on LFS data. He identifies three broad categories of lone parent: younger lone parents (under 24) who are single, with one child (c8,000); middle-aged lone parents, who are a mixture of single and separated, with varying family sizes (c37,000); and older women, primarily widows, with few dependent children (c70,000). The socio-economic profile of lone parents is strongly disadvantaged. Their education profile is remarkably similar to the long-term unemployed as defined by the LFS, in that half have only a primary, or lower, level of educational attainment. There is also evidence of a connection between lone parenthood and early school leaving, with around 60 per cent of younger lone parents having left school with intermediate or lower educational attainment. The housing characteristics of lone parents are also suggestive of a weak socio-economic status, especially younger families where over two-thirds (70 per cent) are in rented (public and private) accommodation (this compares to 18 per cent for the total population). Finally, it is clear from administrative records that nearly all lone parents are in receipt on social welfare, with seven out of 10 on means-tested payments. This dependence leaves lone parents at a high risk of poverty, with 57 per cent falling below the 50 per cent income poverty line in 1994, as compared with 21-34 per cent for two-parent families (Callan *et al*, 1997). This figure is a considerable dis-improvement on the 30 per cent risk recorded in 1987.

³The most recent (June 1997) information indicates 74,812 recipients of lone parent-related payments. This includes 13,758 on the new OPFP and 41,414 on the LPA (total 55,502). Over time, all LPA recipients will be transferred to the OPFP, while recipients of insurance-based lone parents payments can opt for the OPFP in order to become eligible for CE, with the option of switching back again in the case of Widow's/Widower's Pension.

⁴A third data source for lone parenthood is the Labour Force Survey. The 1995 figures indicate 64,000 lone parents, with an estimated 68,000 in 1996. There are important differences in the data collection methods of the various sources, which would imply some discrepancy between the figures (see McCashin, 1997).

Lone parents are also found to have a weak attachment to the labour market, with an overall participation rate of only 29 per cent and 23.6 per cent at work.⁵ These figures vary with age, with younger and middle cycle families having higher participation rates. They also vary with educational status, ranging from 16 for those with no qualifications to 69 per cent for third level graduates. Lone parent participation rates are similar to those for married women. This, together with international evidence, suggests that the marginal employment position of lone parents is a subset of the inferior economic status of women, especially those with children. This inferiority can be seen to derive from a whole range of negative institutional factors for women in the Irish situation. These relate to education and training levels, general conditions of work and rates of pay, child-care provision, unit of assessment in the tax/welfare systems, and financial support for families. (Millar *et al*, 1992; McCashin, 1997)

2.3 *costs of lone parenthood*

Another aspect is the financial and social costs associated with lone parenthood. These are mostly gleaned through qualitative rather than quantitative documentation. Some of these are obvious, such as child-care and household maintenance. Others relate to quality of life, such as social isolation, burden of parenting alone, and victimisation. However, there are also positive features associated with being a lone parent, notably personal and financial independence, especially for those who had been in a difficult marriage (McCashin, 1996).

3. **Lone parents and labour market policy**

Government policy on lone parents has traditionally been based on providing income support to underpin their primary role as carers of children in the home.⁶ In recent years, this perspective has been challenged by a number of factors, some of which are specific to lone parents, others which arise from a greater gender awareness and new directions in welfare policy. These include: the increase in the number of lone parents on welfare and the attendant exchequer costs; the high risk of poverty associated with lone parenthood; a recognition of the diversity of lone parents' needs; the concentration of lone parent (and other poor) families in particular localities; a demand for greater access to paid employment among women, including specific aides to assist those who are disadvantaged; obstacles to labour market participation arising from the interaction of the tax and welfare systems; switch towards active labour market measures to tackle the position of those with poor employment prospects.

Policy on lone parents has shifted quite significantly in recent years in favour of giving lone parents greater independence and choice in terms of their living conditions. A key theme in this new framework has been to encourage increased take-up of employment, which is reflected in two main policy arenas: social welfare changes and labour market programmes, with developments in child-care and local self-help initiatives also being important. Crucially, these reforms have been developed in a spirit of enhancing government support for lone parents, rather than a simple concern with minimising

⁵Defined by principal economic status.

⁶Lone parenthood is thus classified as a specific family contingency under the social welfare system. Originally, this took the form of named categories - unmarried mothers, etc. However, this approach was seen as stigmatising and over time, has been replaced with a more neutral and all-embracing classification.

welfare costs. (See McCashin, 1997, for a general review of employment policy for lone parents.)

3.1 *social welfare*

As many lone parents on welfare desire or may only get part-time work, the interplay between welfare provision and income from work is critical to their labour market participation. Traditionally, there was limited scope for lone parents on welfare to secure earnings from work. The first step in reforming the structure of welfare support for lone parents occurred in the 1994 Budget when the LPA income disregard was increased and expanded to include an explicit child-care element and a 50 per cent taper was introduced. These measures arose from the interim report of the expert group on tax/welfare integration. Reform was taken a stage further with the introduction of the OPFP in 1997, whose means test is explicitly structured to provide incentives to lone parents to seek employment (disregard first £6,000 of earnings, withdrawal rate of 50 percent on additional earnings up to £12,000 and £6 weekly means disregard). These reforms are in keeping with the general 'welfare to work' approach of the Department of Social Welfare (eg new means test for unemployment assistance, tapered withdrawal of adult dependant allowance, introduction of Back-to-work Allowance, enhancement of FIS and restructuring of child income support in favour of Child Benefit).

These reforms represent a significant improvement in the financial package provided for lone parents who take-up employment. However, the effects of the changes are lessened on four accounts: first, there are various restrictions on the benefits conferred in that earnings thresholds only apply to gross income, the eligibility criteria for housing income support, both differential rent and SWA supplements, are unchanged (this is a significant limitation given the high dependence on subsidised housing among younger lone parents), and at higher income levels and among larger families, the gains are considerably reduced (eg loss of secondary benefits on exceeding the £250 threshold, the low earning threshold of £12,000, the additional child-care costs for larger families); second, lone parents face considerable financial disincentives in taking up employment, so that the revised payment structure ensures welfare dependency does not constitute an actual *barrier* to paid employment; third, research suggests that decisions by lone parents in regard to employment are influenced as much by the *amount* of their combined welfare/work income as the *stability and security* of this income (McCashin, 1997); fourth, purely financial measures have, on their own, limited scope to improve the work prospects of groups such as lone parents - access to training and employment programmes and to affordable child-care services are also, if not more, important.

3.2 *labour market programmes*

A long-standing feature of labour market programmes targeted at the unemployed was their exclusion of lone parents and others not registered on the live register. In recent years, however, lone parents have been progressively defined as an eligible category for both new and existing programmes (eg CE, VTOS, Back-to-work Allowance, Youthreach, CORI Part-time Job Opportunities Pilot Programme, Whole-time Jobs Initiative and Work-place). They have also been targeted as a key client group under the Local Employment Service (LES) and by local development partnerships and other groups under the Integrated Development in Designated Disadvantaged and Other Areas programme. The policy rationale for this is outlined in various official reports on unemployment and poverty.⁷ This acknowledges that lone parents are a specific

⁷The interim report of the Task Force on Long-term Unemployment (1995) identified lone parents, together with dependent spouses of the long-term unemployed (both mainly women) as one of four priority groups for the LES. Similarly, the Department of Enterprise and Employment strategy document on the labour market (1996), in

unemployment category in need of assistance to access employment. This derives both from their overwhelmingly female composition (ie gender equity) and additional issues arising from their family structure.

Some caveats can be entered about this policy shift. First, some labour market programmes remain out-of-bounds for lone parents due to the lack of child-care facilities or the hours of attendance (eg 5 day week, early morning classes) or the imposition of eligibility barriers⁸ or the type of work experience/number of places available. Second, more disadvantaged groups - such as lone parents - tend to congregate in those programmes which are of the poorest quality in terms of training provision and linkages with the open jobs market. Furthermore, such programmes provide weak progression to further educational and training provision, despite the fact that participants are in greatest need of this type of help (Sexton and O'Connell, 1996). Not surprisingly, the main outcome of labour market programmes for lone parents is frequently assessed in terms of personal and social benefits, rather than skill development or enhancement of job prospects (McCashin, 1997). Third, labour market programmes on their own are unlikely to contribute to employment opportunities in the absence of child-care and related services.

3.3 *child-care*

Child-care services with the explicit intention of facilitating labour market participation of lone parents have recently been developed. Improvements in this area have arisen more from a combination of ad-hoc initiatives rather than an explicit government policy, despite the large number of official reports on this topic.⁹ These child-care services are not generally confined to lone parents, but targeted at disadvantaged women who wish to pursue education and employment opportunities. One of the most important developments is the pilot child-care initiative operated by ADM with funding from the Department of Equality and Law Reform (McKeown and Fitzgerald, 1997). This primarily provided capital costs for the development of child-care facilities in disadvantaged areas under the aegis of voluntary and community organisations. The running costs of child-care services are sourced through a variety of means: CE, health boards, the Department of Social Welfare (grants schemes for women and lone parents), local development partnerships, fundraising and parental contributions.

This piecemeal scenario is unsatisfactory on a number of accounts. The main issue is the absence of a general policy framework governing the provision of child-care services, in particular the running costs of such services. Indeed, the current ad-hoc provision may result in a ghettoisation of child-care as a policy issue, characterised by under-funding, fragmented availability and variable quality. Second, there is limited assistance with the *demand* for child-care. There is evidence of a growing willingness

making the case for more effective targeting of resources, selected lone parents (in receipt of LPA for 12 months and over 21 years) as one of four priority categories for the CE and skills foundation programmes. The Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development also includes disadvantaged women/lone parents among its target group. Finally, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (1997) states that specific measures will be introduced to improve the labour force participation of women in poor households.

⁸The standard eligibility requirements are receipt of LPA/OPFP for over 1 year and aged over 21 years.

⁹Another official investigation was announced recently under the aegis of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

on the behalf of community welfare officers to contribute to child-care costs on education/training programmes, but this has all the problems associated with a discretionary payment. While there is an in-built disregard for child-care in the OPFP, its lack of transparency and inflexibility (it does not vary according to number of children or hours worked) limits its impact. (The current government's proposal to introduce a tax relief for child-care will not help in this regard as it specifically excludes lone parents, as well as being highly regressive in nature.) Third, there is a limited integration of child-care services with places of employment or education and training.

3.4 *community self-help initiatives*

There has been a proliferation of local self-help initiatives for lone parents in recent years. These are supported at national level by the Department of Social Welfare (notably the scheme of grants for lone parents) and the Horizon and Now EU programmes, and locally through activities undertaken by community development projects (eg Parents Alone Resource Centre, Coolock) and local development partnerships (eg PAUL Partnership Limerick, Tallaght Partnership). These varied initiatives provide confidence-building measures, child-care facilities and small-scale educational and training programmes in an environment of mutual support.

The value of such initiatives in terms of providing a springboard for accessing mainstream labour market programmes is indirect rather than direct. Their main aim is to provide an opportunity for lone parents to assess their situation in a secure and supportive environment and to identify ways by which they could assume more control over their lives, including possible employment options. There are also some structural limitations as to the impact of these initiatives from an employment perspective: inadequate certification, weak linkage with mainstream educational and training programmes and short-term duration.

3.5 *overview*

Public policy on lone parents has taken on a decidedly pro-employment focus, recognising lone parenthood as experiencing a distinct form of exclusion from the labour market. The four main instruments of this policy reform share some common limitations, however. The first is the poor integration of the various initiatives. A second is their overwhelmingly short-term focus, with a consequent failure to recognise and address the marginal employment status of and restricted employment options (pay, working conditions, etc) for lone parents. The danger here is of transferring the economic marginality of lone parents from the social welfare system onto the labour market (low paid, temporary work, with poor quality child-care). Third, policy has tended to isolate lone parents from the generality of women and families, in the process marginalising their needs and creating conflict with other family types.

4. **Lone parents and the community employment programme**

4.1 *background to and extent of lone parent participation in CE*

Lone parents were included as an eligible category for CE when it was first introduced in April 1994. This coincided with a doubling of the number of participants (to 40,000), as compared to the previous intake under SES/CEDP. The inclusion of lone parents followed on from their participation in the CEDP, and reflected a new rationale underlying government labour market policy (see 3.4 above). Lone parent participation on CE is supported by other policy initiatives: the means test under the OPFP applies to income from CE; CE is frequently used to provide child-care services for lone parents, both participants and others; and local lone parent groups use CE projects as a means

of providing personal development and other services. From an employment perspective, CE has a number of specific attractions for lone parents: it is part-time and flexible, the place of work is local, there is a strong social dimension to the programme, it is relatively easy to access in terms of application procedures, much of the type of work is service-oriented, and payment is secure and pre-determined. There is also the opportunity to extend the duration of CE for a second year or to participate in the three year part-time job option.

There are currently (July 1997) 7,000 lone parents on CE, representing 17 per cent of the total. This share has increased from 4 per cent in 1994, 9 per cent in 1995 and 11.5 per cent in 1996. This growth must be seen in the context of the previous exclusion of lone parents under SES (and their low starting base), and an overall increase in female participation from 26 per cent in 1994 to 45 per cent in 1997. Other considerations, such as the changing nature of the type of projects being established under CE (social and community services) and the total pool of unemployed people willing to go on CE, must also be borne in mind. This level of participation is comparable with year one of the Whole-time Jobs Initiative, where 14 per cent are lone parents. An assertion that the increased participation of lone parents has been at the expense of other groups, notably long-term recipients of UA/UB, is not substantiated given the 100 per cent increase in the numbers on the programme. It is also important to place participation on CE in the context of the overall stock of lone parents. The number of lone parents on CE represents 13 per cent of the current population (55,500, though not all would be over 21 years or one year on this payment). The number of lone parents on CE, while recording significant growth, can thus be seen as still relatively modest.

4.2 *net income on CE*

The net income available to lone parents on CE, as compared to other participants, has given rise to considerable comment. The first thing to note here is that the situation pertaining on CE is but a sub-set of the general policy approach to retention of earnings under OPFP. Two workers having different net incomes due to their welfare status is also not unusual: for instance, this would apply with the Back-to-work Allowance and also operates under the CORI scheme, where participants work different hours for the same income. There is a consistent logic in treating CE as earnings, in that the combined income (CE + OPFP) is liable to tax and is used in applying the £250 ceiling for retention of secondary benefits. Equally, the retention of existing welfare status is not unique to lone parents; it also applied to recipients of Disability Allowance. Second, the examples quoted typically refer to a lone parent with three dependent children. There are misleading in that only 12 per cent of recipients of OPFP have three children or more; most (70 per cent) have in fact only one child. The more typical differential is therefore £44.60 per week, rather than the quoted £75. (Also, the scope to earn additional income from part-time employment is much less for lone parents than other groups due to child-care responsibilities and absence of a spouse.)

It is also important to note that the higher net income for lone parents compensates for the additional costs they face in taking-up work. The main item here is child-care, which could reasonably be assumed to cost £30 per week. Travelling, meal and clothing costs would be additional to that (Cosgrove and Duggan, 1994). In comparing the income of lone parents with that of other groups, the fact that both are extremely low is often lost sight of. The issue is therefore one of boosting the income of previously unemployed people on CE, rather than reducing that of lone parents.¹⁰

¹⁰The income support role of CE is widely acknowledged as an important benefit for CE, especially in a context where there are few legitimate prospects to improve income levels.

The other side of the financial argument is the additional cost to the exchequer of lone parent participation on CE, as compared to other groups. Lone parents are of course not unique in this regard: small farmers, unemployed people with reduced payments, adult dependants and people with a disability all fall into this category. Meanwhile, an alternative viewpoint would suggest that expenditure on labour market programmes is already excessively based on achieving a low cost/high quantity ratio, with far less concern with the quality of these programmes and their long-term impact on labour market integration. A recent EU-commissioned review of Irish labour market programmes states

Such an approach (better quality) would require the allocation of substantially greater resources targeted specifically at those most disadvantaged in the labour market, an issue which raises major political decisions about how the fruits of the recent economic growth are to be distributed in society. (Sexton and O'Connell, 1996).

This argument especially applies to lone parents, whose diverse needs would indicate that labour market integration will require additional government support, not less.

4.3 *progression from CE*

Perhaps the most crucial issue relating to CE is its impact on the job prospects of participants. Again, a criticism here is that CE is 'being seen as an attractive job in itself.....rather than a stepping stone to mainstream employment'. Also, it is suggested that lone parents are frequently granted an extension under the integration option. However, this view appears to be in contradiction of the very aims of CE, one of which is to offer a proportion (25 per cent) of participants a 'part-time job', as well as allowing up to 10 per cent of those on the integration option to remain on for a second year. The justification for this was outlined by the Task Force on Long-term Unemployment: for those with poor employment prospects (such as recipients of LPA for three years and over 35 years), 'the most appropriate labour market strategy is, therefore, the provision of a longer duration direct employment opportunity on a contract basis - a sponsored job'.¹¹ There is also a very real financial aspect to this lack of progression. While there are significant benefits to participation on CE under the OPFP, there are equally significant dis-benefits to taking-up employment in the open labour market. To do so would result in the immediate loss of some secondary benefits, while the withdrawal of OPFP, combined with increased tax liability, creates a poverty trap at earnings above CE rates.¹² Thus, lone parents can be financially trapped on CE.

The failure of CE lone parent participants to progress into employment must also be assessed in the wider context of the weak labour market status of lone parents and the failure of poor quality programmes such as CE to compensate for this. Sexton and O'Connell (1996) document how direct employment schemes have 'no lasting effect on job prospects' of participants. They explain this poor performance as follows:

Relatively low placement rates from such programmes are partly due to the low qualifications and poor previous labour market experiences of participants, but they also reflect the quality of the programmes and,

¹¹ *Report of the Task Force on Long-term Unemployment* (1995), p52.

¹² The net income is the same (c £160) for a lone parent whether in a job with a gross pay of £90 per week or in one of £240 per week (see table A5 in McCashin, 1997).

where is it provided, the level of training.....It is difficult to imagine how 20 days of training could be expected to counteract the educational disadvantages of most CE participants. (Ibid, p159)

The policy conclusion they come to is:

that general training or temporary employment supports are of themselves unlikely to significantly improve the job prospects of participants unless they are followed by progression to more advanced schemes which have better linkages with the open labour market. This suggests the need for reintegration paths designed to allow the long-term unemployed and socially excluded to progress through a series of programmes tailored to their particular needs with the ultimate objective of securing sustainable employment. (Ibid, pxxiii)

This again points to the fact that lone parents need more, rather than less help to secure work in the open labour market. The inclusion of lone parents as a target group under the LES reflects this understanding.

5. Conclusion

The participation of lone parents on CE (eligibility and conditions) must be seen in the policy context of an active labour market strategy for this marginalised category. This approach is also in keeping with government policy regarding gender equity, pro-work tax/welfare reform and anti-poverty strategy. The key features of the lone parent package are minimising financial disincentives and providing access to labour market programmes, with the provision of child-care services and self-help initiatives playing minor roles.

This approach has a number of flaws, notably the lack of integration of measures and their short-term nature. The danger of this ad-hoc approach is to corral lone parents into dead-end employment programmes which offer marginally better income levels and localised provision of child-care, but provide no long-term and cumulative improvement in their employment prospects. There is a clear need to improve the quality of CE so as to enhance its effectiveness as a tool of labour market integration. In addition, CE may need refinement in terms of the specific needs of lone parents, in particular young lone parents (McCashin, 1997). It would also be important to incorporate those features which make CE particularly attractive to lone parents in other programmes and the open labour market (eg opportunities for social development, child-care provision). Finally, the tax/welfare regime governing lone parents is in need of reform, in order to minimise the operation of a poverty trap.

Meanwhile, to the extent that this income differential is seen as an urgent policy concern, the way forward is to enhance the income of other groups by providing a child-care allowance for married women or by increasing payment rates or by treating CE as earned income through the UA earnings disregard or under FIS. A more ambitious reform package, which would have wider labour market benefits, would be to change the structure of welfare payments, either by breaking the link between welfare status and child income support (ie enhancing the value of child benefit) or by individualising welfare payments between men and women. The key message here is that targeting measures on lone parents can isolate this group from other equally disadvantaged categories, resulting in unhelpful divisions between different family types. However, to dis-improve the current eligibility and income arrangements governing lone parent participation on CE in response to this would be a retrograde step. These issues should

be considered in the context of the equitable tax and welfare treatment of households, which is the brief of the working group.

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