

Northern Ireland
Gingerbread
supporting lone parents and their children



BRIGHT FUTURES?

The needs and circumstances of one parent families living in the WHSSB area
March, 2005

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living in the WHSSB area

by Linda Spence
March, 2005

Charts by Ursula McAnulty



DERRY CITY COUNCIL

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Foreword

In commissioning this research, Gingerbread set out to find out as much as possible about one parent families in the Western Board area. The picture which emerges in this report is familiar to us: one parent families doing their best to cope, often under severe pressure. The high numbers of participants suffering from stress, anxiety and depression, however, is very concerning.

Being part of a one parent family is now a consistent indicator of poverty and inequality for children growing up in Northern Ireland. We hope that this report will make a difference to lone parents and their children in the WHSSB area by raising awareness about their needs and circumstances and encouraging appropriate responses from those concerned with supporting families.

Gingerbread would like to thank the funders who made it possible to carry out this work: Sperrin Lakeland H&SS Trust, Foyle H&SS Trust, WHSSB and Derry City Council. We are very grateful for your support. Our appreciation also goes to Linda Spence for producing a report of such high quality and to all of the lone parents who took part in the research.

Anne Sweeney
Assistant Director

Researcher's Acknowledgements

I would like to thank a number of people who helped to make this research possible. They include the 151 lone parents who participated in the research by completing a questionnaire and (in the case of 27 individuals), who gave up their time to attend a focus group. Thank you for sharing details of your lives and I hope you will find that I have made good use of your information to give an accurate picture of the circumstances of lone parents in the Western Health and Social Services Board area. Thanks are also due to the co-ordinators of a number of voluntary and community groups in Derry and across the five district council areas, who facilitated the distribution of questionnaires and to the Aisling Centre, Enniskillen and to the Omagh and Dungiven Surestart programmes, who also each provided premises for a focus group.

I am very grateful for the unfailing help of Ursula McAnulty of the University Of Ulster, who provided data analysis and produced the charts which illustrate the statistical information in the text. I also appreciated the work of Alison Upton, who accompanied me to each focus group to take notes and supervise tape-recording and who undertook the painstaking work of transcription. Thanks also to Prof. Monica McWilliams for reading and commenting upon an earlier draft of this report.

Finally, I wish to thank the staff of Gingerbread for their assistance with this research in various ways. In particular, Maria Fox, Regional Manager, Derry, worked hard to recruit participants and to publicise the research and I was much supported by Anne Sweeney, Assistant Director, not least by her careful reading of the text of this report and useful suggestions for revisions.

Lynda Spence
March 2005.

Executive Summary

Introduction

'Bright Futures' presents the findings of research commissioned by Gingerbread NI, which was carried out in 2004 amongst 151 lone parents in the WHSSB area. The objectives were:

- to provide baseline data which would give a demographic profile of lone parents in the Board area as well as information about income, employment and living standards
- to explore their use of childcare, their perceptions of their health and well being and that of their children
- to explore their use of and satisfaction or otherwise with services
- to gain some insight into the effects of family breakdown on children
- to inform service development to meet the needs of one parent families more effectively
- to identify gaps in and promote a co-ordinated approach to service provision.

Lone parents in Northern Ireland and the WHSSB area - Socio economic circumstances

While Northern Ireland no longer has the worst unemployment rate of all the UK regions, it still has:

- High levels of long-term unemployment in certain geographical areas
- A low wage economy and average household income that is 22% lower than the UK average (in conjunction with higher fuel and energy costs)
- Child poverty affecting some 38% of families in Northern Ireland with dependent children (McLaughlin and Dignam, 2002; Hillyard et al, 2003).

The Western Board area is characterised by a number of measures of socio-economic deprivation:

- One in three wards in Derry city has a child poverty rate above 70% and three city wards, Shantallow East, Brandywell and Creggan South, have the highest rates of child poverty in Northern Ireland (Horgan, 2005).
- Lower rates of full-time employment than the NI average
- Higher unemployment and long term unemployment.
- Higher percentage of people in the lower socio-economic classification and more with no educational qualifications, compared to NI as a whole.
- Housing conditions are worse in parts of the WHSSB area than in any other area.
- The West has the highest proportion of people with a potential psychiatric disorder and more people who suffer a severe lack of social support (WHSSB, 2004).

Many lone parents and their children are likely to experience poor socio-economic circumstances: low levels of income, unemployment and dependence on state benefits and social housing. They are also subject to worse health than couples with children.

In the present research:

- Two thirds of respondents were living on incomes of less than £150 a week,
- Three quarters were in debt,
- 97% were in receipt of some form of state benefit apart from Child Benefit,
- 70% were not in paid employment and
- Over three quarters lived in rented accommodation.

The findings indicate that two thirds of the sample population were living on very low incomes of less than £150 a week and dependant on state benefits, chiefly Income Support. A majority of respondents have a standard of living well below what most people

in Northern Ireland regard as acceptable (see Hillyard et al, 2003). 75% of respondents were indebted to family, friends and a variety of creditors, including, doorstep lenders, to whom they would have been paying a high rate of interest.

The decision by a lone parent to juggle work and parenting may involve a complex balancing of factors. There was a strong perception of a dearth of suitable jobs in the area, a fear of coming off benefits and being no better off, and difficulties with transport (only a third of respondents had a car). Also significant were education and training, childcare and health issues, each of which will now be discussed in more detail.

Amongst the non-employed majority of respondents, one quarter was not seeking work because they lacked the qualifications and skills to do so. However, nearly a third were taking steps to improve their prospects by studying or training.

Health issues

A recent report on health inequalities in Northern Ireland (McWhirter, 2004) found that high levels of stress and worry were related to gender, age, family and employment status: that is, they were more likely to be associated with being female, being young or middle aged with dependent children and being unemployed.

These factors apply to a majority of WHSSB respondents and indeed 99% of the sample population reported some form of stress or worry in their lives:

- Money worries were the major stressor
- Not getting a break from parenting
- Loneliness and isolation
- Worries about their children's behaviour
- Children's health
- Respondents' own health
- Housing

- Conflict with an ex-partner
- Inability to find employment
- Other people's attitudes

Lone parents also reported high levels of physical and emotional ill health in relation to their age (most are in their twenties and thirties). A majority (57%) of survey respondents stated that they were suffering or had suffered depression, while a number of focus group participants vividly described their experiences of emotional distress. Nearly one in five respondents stated that they were in receipt of a disability benefit.

Children

A number of parents described specific ailments which gave rise to worries about their children, while others were clearly troubled by the difficulty, due to low incomes, of providing a nutritious diet for the family. In the aftermath of family breakdown, it appeared that many of the lone parents were making an effort to maintain contact, for the sake of their children, with their ex-partner.

Nearly 60% of respondents reported that their children were still in contact with their other parent. Of these children, more than two thirds saw their other parent at least once a week. A majority of the lone parents who were still in touch with their ex-partner said that the relationship was now either good or fair. Between 22% and 28% said that their children had become less confident, more stressed and more aggressive since becoming part of a one parent family, with smaller minorities of children becoming less settled at school or doing less well in schoolwork.

Childcare

Survey respondents and focus group participants all emphasised the importance of high quality, accessible and affordable childcare, as an absolute essential to enable them to work, or to afford them time for study/training, or simply to get a break from

parenting. Unfortunately, this research demonstrates that while some respondents were benefiting from the childcare components of WTC and some from the crèche facilities offered by Gingerbread, Surestart and other local groups, many lone parents in the WHSSB area are forced to be over-reliant on the good will of relatives and friends to provide this service. Partly this is due to transport problems and the difficulties of finding evening babysitters in a rural area, but it may also relate to benefit regulations. In order to claim childcare costs under WTC, childminders must be registered. In some cases the difficulty related to a lack of registered childminders or other registered childcare provision:

Policy implications in Northern Ireland

The low levels of income experienced by a majority of lone parents who took part in this research point to high levels of child poverty. A major study of poverty in Northern Ireland in 2003 challenged policy makers and society in general to consider whether the political will and social consensus exist to harness the progressive equality framework of section 75, new TSN and human rights legislation to eradicate child poverty (Hillyard et al, 2003).

Following a review of New Targeting Social Need (TSN), it was announced that there will be a greater focus on new targets, including lone parents. The report proposes a new group to promote social inclusion, to develop a strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion among lone parents. Such proposals, if enacted, would greatly benefit lone parents in Northern Ireland, as would a renewed focus on capacity building. The report cites 'the relevance of a wide range of programmes such as health, education and employment and training to enhancing an individual's capacity to participate in economic and social life, which in turn acts as an "insulator" against poverty' (www.research.ofmdfmi.gov.uk). WHSSB respondents have difficulties in accessing such programmes and would

welcome sustainably funded education, training and job opportunities in their local areas.

Gingerbread NI has welcomed the proposals to reform New TSN but called for resourcing. The Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner has warned that the government's Draft Priorities and Budget 2005-08 could jeopardize future children's services and in particular, the proposed ending of the Children's Fund could affect 'the innovative and creative projects ...(which) are directed to those children and young people in greatest need' (www.childpolicy.org.uk/news), including children in one parent families.

Policy and funding implications at Board level

- Two thirds of respondents said that they had consulted a GP
- Nearly half of these consultations were because of depression.
- Only a third mentioned seeing a health visitor
- A quarter had seen a counsellor.
- Less than one in eight reported contact with a social worker, a CPN or mediation services.
- Around one in five had made use of services offered by Gingerbread.

Health visitors attained the highest approval rating amongst health professionals. Three quarters of those who had consulted a GP were satisfied, though there were some complaints about GPs' treatment of depression. Some respondents were not happy about being offered anti-depressants as their only treatment. A minority (14%) of respondents felt that health professionals had unfavourable attitudes to lone parents. They felt that they were not listened to, or were being patronised. This suggests that health and social care professionals need to offer support, particularly to young lone mothers, in a sensitive way which does not undermine

their autonomy. The Board may also need to address ways of offering more support to lone parents suffering stress, anxiety and depression.

Amongst those who had used other services, there were high levels of satisfaction (almost 100% in the case of Gingerbread). Lone parents spoke enthusiastically about the help and support they had received from Gingerbread, from the Surestart programme and from other locally based groups. The provision of social support adds value to these services and is crucial in mitigating the isolation and loneliness experienced by many lone parents. Only a minority of those surveyed mentioned having access to this support. This is likely to be attributable to under-provision of services, particularly in rural areas, or to under-funding of existing services. Lone parents would welcome and make use of self-help and support groups that are available within their own locality. Lone fathers, in particular, were requesting this and working lone parents identified a need for groups that meet outside working hours.

An expansion of support services to lone parents by the Board, Trusts and other providers would entail greater financial support, not only for organisations specifically for lone parents, such as Gingerbread, but also for childcare and for programmes of support for families and parenting in general. Some lone parents are struggling, not just with difficult economic circumstances, but with conflict with an ex-partner and the emotional and behavioural difficulties of their children and it is these families who may most need the support of statutory and voluntary services.

The WHSSB Health and Wellbeing Investment plan 2004/05 undertakes to continue to contribute to the future development of New TSN, whose action plans include outcomes relating to the promotion of good quality

services in areas of greatest need, policies and programmes which aim to reduce inequalities and to identify those in greatest need and measure the extent to which inequalities are being reduced (WHSSB, 2004).

It is to be hoped that the findings of this research, alongside the Board's own community consultation (to which Gingerbread NI contributed on behalf of lone parents), will contribute to a greater understanding of the needs of one parent families in the WHSSB area and will provide an impetus for improvements in services and support for this section of the population.

BRIGHT FUTURES?

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of research carried out in 2004 amongst 151 lone parents in the Western Health and Social Services Board (WHSSB) area of Northern Ireland, covering the district council areas of Derry, Fermanagh, Limavady, Omagh and Strabane. It was commissioned by Gingerbread Northern Ireland with funding which had been obtained from Sperrin Lakeland H&SS Trust, Foyle H&SS Trust, the WHSSB and Derry City Council. Gingerbread is the lead voluntary organisation working with lone parents in Northern Ireland to provide services and to represent their views.

The growing number of lone parent families in the UK, which had risen from 8% of all families with dependent children in 1971 to 22% in 1995 (Gray, 2001), has been the focus of much policy debate in recent decades, prompting a body of UK academic research in the 1990s, some of which was funded by government departments. This research revealed the extent of the poor socio-economic circumstances experienced by the majority of one parent families (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Ford, Marsh and McKay, 1995), though a recent Department of Work and Pensions report (Marsh and Vegeris, 2004) on the longest ever study of British lone parent families shows some improvement in their circumstances over ten years. British research has also highlighted the health disadvantages of lone parents compared with parents in couples (Popay and Jones, 1991; Reeves et al, 1994; Benzeval, 1998; Shouls et al, 1999).

There has been comparatively little research on lone parents in Northern Ireland. The largest study, of 1665 lone mothers (Evason et al, 1998) explored the dependence of lone mothers on state benefits and the barriers to moving into employment. A major study of poverty in Northern Ireland (Hillyard et al,

2003), whilst not specifically focusing on lone parents, found that two thirds of this group live on low incomes. Research commissioned by Gingerbread NI into the social and health care needs of lone parents in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area (Spence, 1996) had also revealed high levels of deprivation, as had its report on the needs of young lone mothers (Muston, 1997). Other research of note is a report, also commissioned by Gingerbread, on the experiences of young people growing up in one parent families in Northern Ireland (Bunting et al, 2003).

Aims and objectives of the research

The impetus for the present research arose from Gingerbread NI's concern to identify service needs within the lone parent population in the WHSSB area. The aims and objectives of the research were similar to previous research carried out in the NHSSB area, but with up-dating to take account of social policy changes since 1996, particularly in relation to the promotion of paid employment for lone parents and other disadvantaged groups as a route out of poverty and social exclusion. Specifically, the objectives of the WHSSB research were:

- to provide baseline data which would give a demographic profile of lone parents in the Board area, as well as information about their income, employment and living standards; to explore their use of childcare; their perceptions of their health and well being and that of their children; their use of and satisfaction or otherwise with services; and to gain some insight into the effects of family breakdown on children.

It was hoped that this information could be used to inform service development to meet the needs of the lone parent population more effectively and to identify gaps in service delivery with the aim of promoting a more co-ordinated approach to service provision.

Definition of a lone parent

The definition of a lone parent used in this research follows the Fowler Report of 1974, which stated that a lone parent is 'a mother or father living without a spouse (not co-habiting) with his or her never-married dependent child or children.'

Lone parents in Northern Ireland

Establishing the numbers of lone parents in Northern Ireland today is not an entirely straightforward matter. The Northern Ireland Census 2001 (www.nisra.gov.uk/census) gives a figure of 50,641 lone parent households with dependent children (8% of all households) (Table KS22). A dependent child is defined as 'a person in a household aged 0-15...or a person aged 16-18 who is a full-time student and in a family with parent(s).' However, a report on household composition in Northern Ireland, using data from the Labour Force Survey (DETINI, 2004) suggests a figure of 85,000 lone parent families (13% of households).

Furthermore, Gingerbread NI works on the basis that there are 95,382 lone parent families in Northern Ireland. This figure is arrived at by analysis of the 2001 NI Census data, Table KS20 (NISRA, 2003). To the figure of 50,461 lone parent households is added 28,986 lone parent households with non-dependent children, plus 15,755 other households with dependent children. Gingerbread argues strongly that the vast majority of the 28,986 households with non-dependent children have children over the age of 18 who are 'still in some way dependent on their parent ie. college/university students, disabled young people etc' (Marie Cavanagh, Director of Gingerbread NI, personal communication, 18/11/04). This claim would appear to be supported by evidence from a research report on young people growing up in one parent families in Northern Ireland (Bunting et al 2003). Marie Cavanagh further argues that the majority of the 15,755 other

households with dependent children are also lone parent households: 'young lone parents who continue to live at home with their extended families and student and other lone parents living in houses of multiple occupation' (ibid). It is likely that this is indeed the case, though the issue is not as clear as in the 1991 NI census, where 8,328 'lone parents, with child(ren), with others' were clearly differentiated. Gingerbread backs up its assertion that one parent families are under-represented by the 50,641 figure by reference to supporting data, specifically figures from the Social Security Agency which show that there were 60,760 lone parents claiming benefits (Income Support and Working Families Tax Credit) in 2002-03. Marie Cavanagh comments that 'it is an acknowledged fact that approximately 65% of lone parents are in receipt of social welfare benefits and when the figure of 60,760 is multiplied up, it equates to a figure of 93,477 one parent families' (ibid).

Lone Parents in the WHSSB area

The above discussion should have served to highlight some of the difficulties involved in arriving at a wholly accurate assessment of the number of lone parent households in Northern Ireland. This factor should be borne in mind in relation to the table below, which presents figures both for the numbers of lone parent households and for all families with children in each of the district councils in the WHSSB area (columns 3 and 4). Column 5 shows the percentage of families in each district which are one parent families. This analysis uses the same method as is used by Gingerbread: that is, by totalling census figures for married couples, co-habiting couples and lone parents with both dependent and non-dependent children, plus other households with dependent children.

District Council Area	Council Area Population (source: WHSSB website)	Number of One Parent families (source: Census 2001)	Total Number of Families with Children (source: Census 2001)	Percentage of Families which are One Parent families (source: Census 2001)
Derry	Pop: 106,200	7824	20,462	38%
Fermanagh	Pop: 51,000	2833	10,590	27%
Limavady	Pop: 33,200	1743	6232	28%
Omagh	Pop: 48,900	2525	9036	28%
Strabane	Pop: 38,400	2338	7371	32%

The table shows that:

- There are 53, 691 families with dependent and non-dependent children in the WHSSB area
- 17,263 (32%) of these are one parent families.
- Derry district council area has the highest proportion of families (38%) which are headed by a lone parent and Fermanagh has the lowest proportion (27%).

If a more conservative approach is used to the presentation and analysis of these figures (including only families with dependent children and omitting both non-dependent children and 'other households with dependent children'), the proportions of lone parent households fall, with 24% (rather than 32%) of families with dependent children in the WHSSB area overall being one parent families: thirty two per cent of families in Derry, 18% in Fermanagh, 18% in Limavady, 19% in Omagh and 23% in Strabane. Whichever method is used, census figures show that 18% of Northern Ireland's one parent families live in the Western Health and Social Services Board area.

Methodology and Fieldwork

The research was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods, encompassing a survey and a series of focus groups. The first stage was the design of a questionnaire, with both closed and open

questions. This was modelled on the questionnaire used in the earlier NHSSB research discussed above (Spence,1996), but with additional questions relating to employment, education and training issues. An important aspect was the final open question, where respondents were given a full page on which to write their own comments about any issue that was of particular concern to them, whether it had featured in the questionnaire or not. It is interesting to note that very many respondents availed of this opportunity, some writing at considerable length.

The questionnaire was piloted with trainees at Gingerbread's Belfast headquarters and after some changes of design was distributed to lone parents in the district council areas of Derry, Fermanagh, Limavady, Omagh and Strabane.

Recruiting respondents

The fieldwork was carried out in the summer months of 2004 (late May to late August) and this created some inevitable difficulties, as it had been intended to contact potential respondents through community and voluntary groups and these groups have fewer contacts with lone parents in mid-summer. Nonetheless, 147 lone parents across the Board area completed a questionnaire.

The research project was officially launched in the regional office of Gingerbread in Derry in June 2004, by the Chairwoman of the Western Health and Social Services Board, Karen Meehan. This was followed by publicity in local newspapers with the aim of inviting lone parents to participate. To further maximise response, an incentive was provided in the form of a prize draw for grocery vouchers. The questionnaire was to be completed anonymously, but respondents could enter the prize draw by giving their contact details on a sheet which could be detached and placed in a sealed envelope. At the same time,

respondents were asked to indicate if they would be prepared to take part in a focus group in their area (for which a small expenses payment would be made). A system of questionnaire coding enabled the researcher to track the response from each district council area.

The questionnaire

In the first stage of distribution, questionnaires (with freepost envelopes) were sent to all Gingerbread members in the WHSSB area. Further batches of ten questionnaires were sent to the 11 voluntary/community groups which had been recruited to assist the research by Gingerbread's Regional Manager, Maria Fox. Follow up telephone contact with these and other groups throughout the region was maintained throughout the summer by the Regional Manager and the researcher. In total, 531 questionnaires were distributed and 147 were returned before the cut-off date in early September. This represents a response rate of 28%, which, while not untypical in quantitative research, was somewhat lower than had been hoped. As indicated above, the response rate may have been affected by the timing of the fieldwork, which had to be carried out in the summer months of 2004. Another factor may have been 'research fatigue' amongst potential respondents, as other similar research projects and consultations, involving the target group, were taking place in the WHSSB area at around the time.

The focus groups

While a slightly lower than anticipated response rate to the questionnaire may be regarded as a limitation of the research, this was balanced by the wealth of data gathered during the second, qualitative stage of the project, which comprised the series of six focus groups held throughout the WHSSB area, involving 23 lone mothers and four lone fathers.

At the questionnaire stage, respondents had been asked to indicate if they would be prepared to participate in a focus group with other lone parents in their local area. Those who had answered in the affirmative were contacted by telephone by the researcher and while some declined for a variety of reasons at this stage, it was possible to convene five focus groups at various venues in each of the District Council areas throughout the Board area. These took place during the period June to August 2004 and were attended by 23 respondents (all female). There were five participants in Derry District Council area, six in Limavady District Council Area, three in Omagh, five in Strabane and four in Fermanagh. Although the numbers in each focus group were small, this was a positive factor, as, with few exceptions, it gave each participant the opportunity to speak frankly and often movingly about her own experiences in a way which might not have been possible in a larger group. Each focus group lasted from one to one and a half hours and was facilitated by the researcher, with technical and note-taking assistance from a Gingerbread worker. With the consent of participants, who were assured of anonymity, each session was tape-recorded and transcribed by the assistant.

Early analysis of the first 50 questionnaires to be returned had provided some preliminary data to draw upon in providing a framework for focus group discussion. The aims were both to explore in more detail themes already established in the questionnaire and to allow for the possibility of additional concerns to be identified by the lone parents. Therefore the discussion was semi-structured, with participants asked to consider the following themes:

- The best and worst things about being a lone parent
- Health, well being and stress
- Children's health and behaviour

- Use of services
- Employment and training issues
- Attitudes to lone parents
- What would make life better for you as a lone parent?

Lone fathers

When the 147 questionnaires were analysed, it was a matter of concern to all involved in the research that only two lone fathers had responded, neither of whom had elected to participate in a focus group. Although the vast majority of lone parents in Northern Ireland are women, with only about one in ten being lone fathers, there was evidently a serious under-representation of this group in the research. Attempts had been made in the first stages to recruit lone fathers, with little success. A decision was later taken to re-visit this aspect of the research by making a last attempt to convene a special focus group of lone fathers in one urban area. This, once again, proved to be quite difficult but by making renewed contacts with community and voluntary groups and New Deal for Lone Parents advisors and through a local radio appeal, Gingerbread's Regional Manager succeeded in recruiting four lone fathers who participated in a focus group in the late autumn of 2004¹. The results from this focus group are discussed in a separate section of this report.

Structure of the report

Following this introduction, sections 2 to 8 set out the findings from research into the circumstances and needs of lone parents in the five district council areas of the Western Health and Social Services Board. In each section, the statistical data from the survey of 147 lone parents is analysed and interspersed with qualitative material from the open questions in the questionnaire and from the six focus groups.

Section 2 provides a demographic and socio-economic profile of respondents, including

gender, age, family size, length of time spent as a lone parent, housing, income and employment status. Section 3 explores issues in childcare.

Section 4 focuses on the health and well being of the lone parents and their children, while section 5 analyses their use of a range of services and their levels of satisfaction. Section 6 is concerned with the lone parents' perception of family, government and health professionals' attitudes towards them. Section 7 presents findings relating to children and the family, including children's contact with the non-custodial parent; lone parents' relationship with their ex-partner; and the effects of family breakdown on the children. Section 8 reports on issues for lone fathers.

The report concludes with a final section (section 9) in which the findings of this research are discussed in more detail. Implications for policy in relation to lone parents in the WHSSB area and beyond are analysed, alongside key recommendations.



¹ The four lone fathers were not among the 147 respondents who completed a questionnaire.

2. DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

This section presents a demographic and social profile of the 147 respondents to the survey carried out in the five district council areas of the Western Health and Social Services Board area. Slightly less than half of respondents (49%) came from the Derry District Council area, with 15 % from Fermanagh DC, 14% from Omagh DC and 9% from Limavady and Strabane DCs respectively. It was not possible, in only a few cases (4%), to determine respondents' area of origin. According to Gingerbread's figures, 45% of lone parents in the WHSSB area live in Derry DC area, 16% in Fermanagh , 15% in Omagh, 14% in Strabane and 10% in Limavady, which suggests a small over-representation of Derry lone parents and a small under-representation of Strabane lone parents in the sample population.

Gender

All but two of the 147 survey respondents were female. Although it is the case that 92% lone parents in Northern Ireland are female and 8% are male (NISRA, 2003), there is a clear under-representation of lone fathers in the survey population. However, as discussed in section 1 of this report, in order partially to redress this imbalance, a special focus group for lone fathers was held. Four lone fathers participated, bringing the total number of lone father respondents to six (4% of all research respondents).

Marital Status

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the most likely route into lone parenthood was through widowhood (Lewis, 1998). In the second half of the century in the UK, for a number of years, lone mothers had been most likely to be separated and divorced but in recent years, the proportion of single, never married mothers has been increasing. Figures from the Continuous Household Survey

(www.csu.nisra.gov.uk, Table 3.4)) reveal that in Northern Ireland in 2000/01, 27% of families with dependent children were one parent families. Of these, 25% were lone mothers and 2 per cent lone fathers. Taking the figures for lone mothers, it is evident that there are now equal proportions of single lone mother families (12% of all families with dependent children) and divorced /separated mothers (also 12%); only one per cent are widowed mother families. While these figures do not reveal how many of the single mothers had departed from a co-habiting stable relationship and how many are single women who have never lived with their child or children's father, other sources may shed some light on this issue. Lewis (2001) points out that in 1994 in Great Britain, 75% of extra-marital births were jointly registered, and 58% of these were by couples living at the same address, while Ford and Millar (1997) state that only about one in five lone parents have never lived with a partner.

Figure 1: Marital status

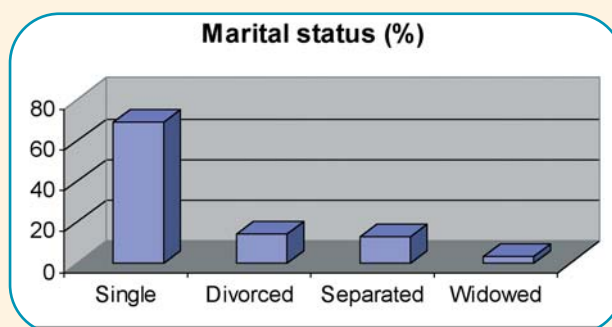


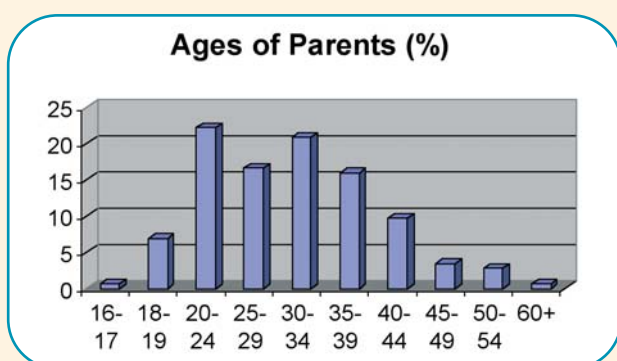
Figure 1 shows the marital status of the sample population in the WHSSB area. Sixty nine per cent described themselves as single, 13% were separated, 15% divorced and 3% were widows. Respondents were not asked at this stage in the questionnaire to state directly whether or not they had co-habited with the other parent of their child but in a later section dealing with changes in children's behaviour following family breakdown, respondents who had never lived with the other parent were

given an opportunity to omit this set of questions. Only thirty per cent did so which may indicate that a large proportion of the 69% describing themselves as single had previously co-habited. (It may also be the case that some respondents chose not to answer this section for reasons other than having never lived with their child or children's father).

Age of parents

Figure 2 gives the age profile of the sample. The majority (76%) of the lone parents were in their twenties and thirties. Twenty-two per cent were aged 20-24, and 17% were aged 25-29. Those aged 30-34 comprised 21% of the sample, with 16% being 35-39. Sixteen per cent were in their forties and fifties, with only one respondent aged over 60. The issue of teenage parenthood has been of great concern to the media and policy makers; in this sample, only just under 7% were single teenage mothers, all but one of whom were aged 18 and 19. In Northern Ireland in 2002, the average teenage birth rate was 16.7 per 1000 females aged 13-19, but the rate is almost half in most rural areas, at 9 per 1000 in rural wards (DHSSPS, 2004).

Figure 2: Ages of parents

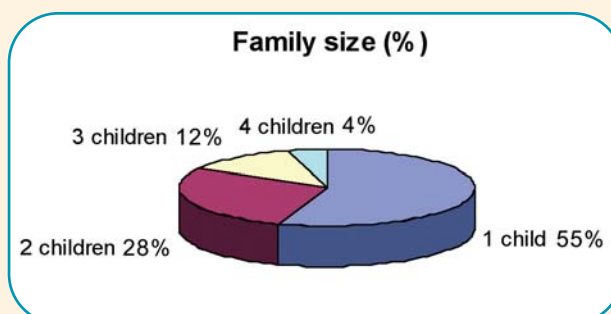


Family Size

The 147 lone parents had between them 240 children, giving an average family size of 1.6 children, which compares with average Northern Ireland family size in 2003-04 of two children in all families with dependent children

and 1.8 for all one parent families (www.csu.nisra.gov.uk, Figure 3.3). More than four out of five of the one parent families surveyed comprised of a parent and one or two dependent children aged 18 or under. However, a majority (55%) of the parents had only one child living with them and 28% had two. Twelve per cent had three children but only 4% reported a family size of four children (see Figure 3).

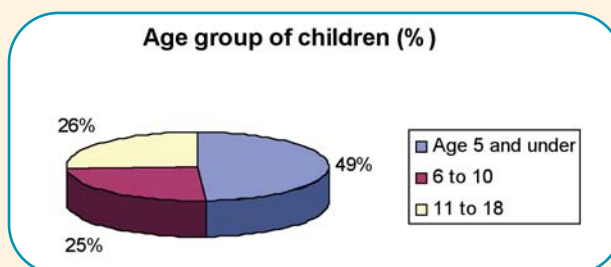
Figure 3: Family size



Children's Ages

As Figure 4 illustrates, 49% of respondents' children were aged 5 and under; 25% were aged 6-10; and 26% were in the 11-18 age group. The preponderance of pre-school and primary school age children (74%) highlights the importance of childcare, an issue which will be discussed later in this report, and the need for family and parenting support.

Figure 4: Age group of children

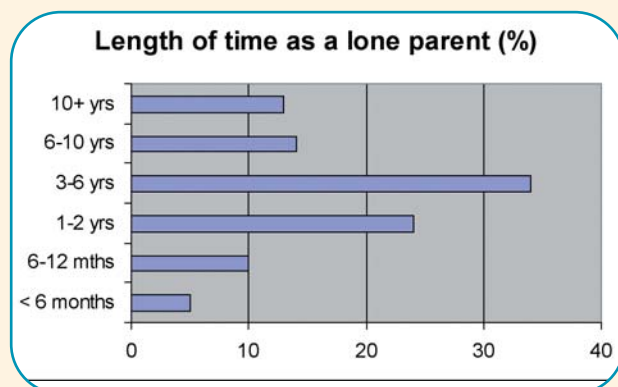


Length of Time Spent as a Lone Parent

Respondents were asked how long they had spent as a lone parent (Figure 5). The largest proportion (58%) had parented alone for a period of one to six years. Just over 15% had

been a lone parent for less than a year, while 14% had maintained this status for six to ten years. For nearly 13% of respondents, lone parenthood had been a longer term state of 10 or more years.

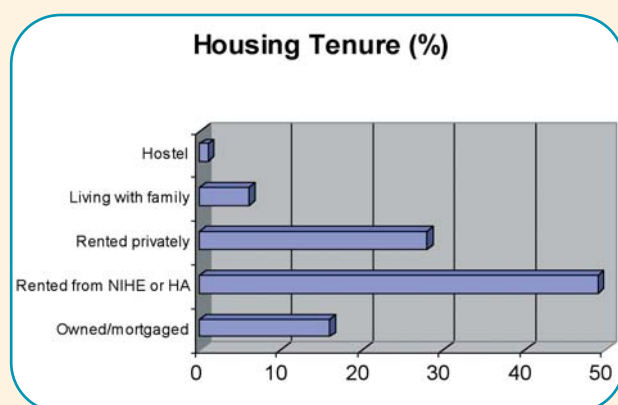
Figure 5: Length of time as a lone parent



Housing Tenure

Figure 6 indicates the housing tenure of lone parents in the survey.

Figure 6: Housing Tenure



Seventy-three per cent of households in Northern Ireland currently are in owner occupied accommodation, with 25% renting either from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) or other sectors (www.csu.nisra.gov.uk, Table 2.6). In the WHSSB sample, only 16% are owner occupiers. Six per cent (nine respondents) were living with family members and one person was in a hostel. Over three-quarters

(77%) were living in rented accommodation (49% in housing executive and housing association tenure and 28% in the privately rented sector). Approximately the same figure is cited in the Family Resources Survey Northern Ireland 2002/03, which states that 75% of households where there is a single adult with children, are renting their home (www.dsdni.gov.uk, news release, 8/4/04).

Employment, Income and Living Standards

This section examines topics such as the employment, income and living standards of the 147 lone parents who completed a questionnaire and took part in a focus group.

The Conservative UK governments of 1979-97 had sought to rein in the cost of the welfare state by reducing the number of claimants of social security benefits, which included a substantial number of lone parents. The Labour government which came to power in 1997 pledged both to eradicate child poverty within 20 years and to promote employment as the route out of poverty and social exclusion for lone parents and other groups. As part of Labour's strategy of 'welfare to work', a number of groups have been targeted through the New Deal programmes, which aim to help benefit claimants, including lone parents, into work and off welfare. The government's target for lone parents is that 70% should be in work by the year 2010 (HM Treasury, 2001). One of the aims of the present research was to shed some light on the extent to which this target was being met in the WHSSB area.

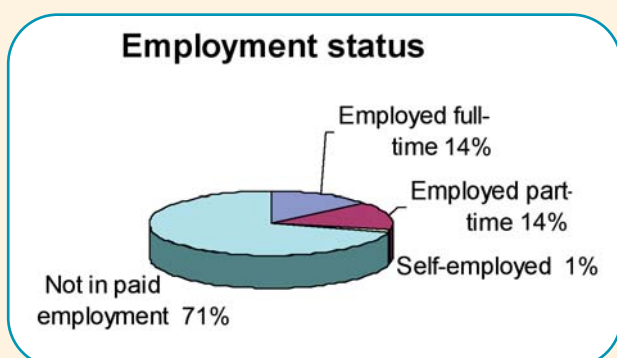
Employment

In Northern Ireland in 2002, 65% of women and 80% of men of working age were economically active, though being a lone parent increases the likelihood of not working outside the home. Overall, 58% of lone parents in Northern Ireland are not in employment, though there are gender differences, with half of all male lone parents

in employment, compared to 38% of female lone parents, most of whom worked part-time (Breitenbach and Galligan, 2004). More lone parents nationally are working, rising from 45.6% in 1997 to almost 54% in 2003 (Verwaayen, 2003)². Employment levels can be linked to children’s ages: while figures from the UK indicate an increasing trend for mothers of even very young children to return to the labour market quickly after starting a family, there are significant differences in the cases of lone mothers and mothers with partners. For instance, in 2003, 58% of partnered mothers of a pre-school child were in employment, compared with 33% of lone mothers (ONS, 2004). The difference is less marked where children are aged 16-18: 80% for mothers with partners compared to 72% for lone mothers.

Figure 7 illustrates that less than 30% of the WHSSB respondents were in paid employment: 14% were working full-time, 14% part-time and 1% (two respondents) were self-employed. Analysis of figures from the 2001 Northern Ireland Census shows that in the WHSSB area, 2,471 female lone parents were in full-time and part-time employment. This is 29% of female lone parents in the Board area. 318 male lone parents were in employment (46%). Since respondents to the present survey are predominantly female lone parents, the finding in relation to employment matches the 2001 Census figure.

Figure 7: Employment status



² Variance in employment amongst lone parents will be the subject of a forthcoming Gingerbread NI research project.

Employed lone parents in the focus groups reflected on the advantages of being in employment for a number of reasons, both financial and social:

Person 1: I always wanted to work. I found very much, you know, you’re kind of trapped in the house. You want to work, to work and get money because really you can’t manage on what you get.

Person 2: It’s not even all financial – it’s something to get up and go to. You know if I was to be at home all day I would crack up. You have to get out where you’re meeting other people and you’re tired when you come home and by the time you get the dinner on and all that... I ‘m not saying that I don’t need the money but it’s good for the children to see you going out to work and you have something to talk about, it’s sometimes more about that side of things.

Person 3: Makes you feel better about yourself.

Person 1: It does, it definitely does.

However, for some, particularly young mothers of very young children, the decision to return to full-time work was a hard one, dictated by financial necessity, as this mother of a seven month old baby said:

I have to go out to work when I would rather be spending proper time with my wee girl. Probably if I was with a partner maybe things would be different and I could stay at home and spend all that time with her...I just got my six months maternity leave and I had to go back then....If I had my choice I would be at home, I would definitely be at home.

Similarly, another young mother, working full-time in clerical/administrative employment wished to work part-time but despite provisions in the 1999 Employment Relations

Act to enable working parents to request flexible working hours, she felt that her employer would not be able to facilitate this and she did not wish to risk her job by pressing the matter:

I would like to go part time, so I would, but unless you're working six years you don't have that opportunity, you know. I have my name down for it but the (waiting) list is horrendous, I think.

One mother of three teenagers, who was herself in poor health, felt that she had to remain in full-time employment in order to finance her children's higher education:

I feel I have to keep working. It probably is half wrecking my health. I have a boy starting university now and he has to go to England to university, he won't go here. I'm working to keep them sort of thing. It's not that I'm working for luxuries, I'm most certainly not, for I don't have luxuries. I'm just working to break even, so to speak, that's how I feel

Forty-two per cent of female employees in Northern Ireland work part-time and 58% work full-time (Breitenbach and Galligan, 2004). The preferred option for these lone parents juggling employment, childcare and domestic responsibilities was to work part-time, if possible:

Really, I don't want to be working full time, I couldn't cope with a full time job. I think part time is adequate when you have a family. I'm saying I couldn't do 8 to 5 and then come home and face (housework and childcare)....yes, I think part time is enough.

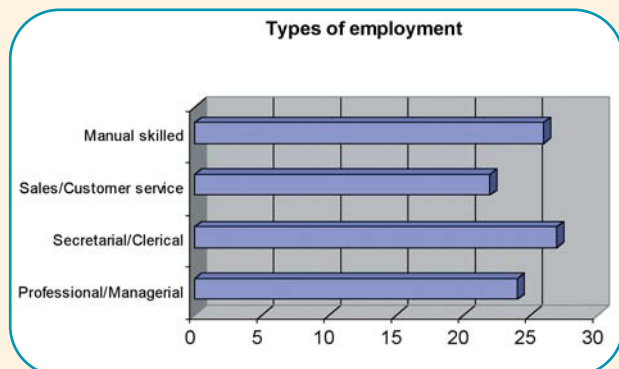
For another mother, who had emerged from an abusive marriage, her decision regarding part-time versus full-time work was dictated by her concern for her primary school age son and her desire to prioritize his needs:

I was working full time and at the time then a part time post came up and I went for that and I got it so. He (her son) was in nursery at the time so it meant that I was home in the afternoon. It meant I got less money and at that time I was just split up too, there was a lot of payments and all. Once again the family helped me out. I felt that it would be for a couple of years and then I would go back full time but now I work in the mornings and when he's home from school ... I'd rather give him the time than be paying somebody else to be minding him, I think especially if you have been in an abusive relationship and there's stress like that going on. I know I have mentioned to him about going into an after-school club or something and it's a definite no. Even though he always has me there, the stress that's going on is affecting him to an extent, it has to be. So I would still prefer that I was the one looking after him. I'm not as well off but I don't care – it's worth it.

Types of Employment

Breitenbach and Galligan (2004) state that 91% of female employees in Northern Ireland work in the service sector. Looking first at the types of employment taken up by the 41 respondents in work, figure 8 shows that for 27% of this group, employment was secretarial/clerical; 24% defined themselves as being in professional or managerial occupations and 22% were in sales and customer services. Ten per cent described themselves as childcare workers and 7% were in the 'manual, skilled' category. The stated occupations of the remaining four respondents were 'special needs assistant', 'voluntary sector', 'advice worker' and 'outreach worker'.

Figure 8: Types of employment



Reasons for not being in paid employment.

As stated above, over 70% of these lone parents were not in paid employment. Why was this the case? When asked, 84% of this group of lone parents stated that they were not looking for work. This is an important finding which requires further exploration (and which will be the subject of forthcoming Gingerbread NI research).

Figure 9: Reasons for not working

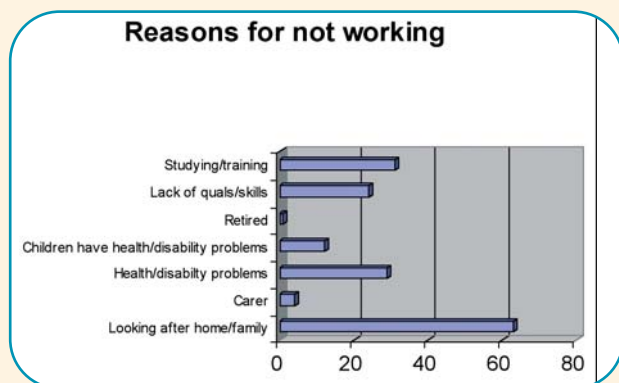


Figure 9 reveals that for these non-working lone parents, a major reason for not seeking work was that they considered 'looking after the home and family' to be their key role: 63% cited this reason. As we have seen above, three quarters of the children in this survey were of primary school age or under and this, in conjunction with childcare issues, has a bearing on their parents' decisions regarding paid employment. A cross-tabulation revealed that 77% of those not in employment had at

least one child under the age of five. There is evidence that, in Northern Ireland, a decision by mothers of pre-school children not to work outside the home is supported by many in the community: the 2002 Life and Times Survey showed that 44% of respondents thought that a woman with a child of this age should stay at home, while only 8% felt that she should work full-time(Gray and Robinson, 2004).

Poor health is also a disincentive to employment. In an evaluation of a UK project to address the training and support needs of lone parents, over half those interviewed described current physical or mental health problems which interfered with their own or their children's activities. A fifth said that these problems were a major barrier to paid employment (John et al, 2001). It is known that lone parents suffer worse health than couple parents (Popay and Jones, 1990; Benzeval, 1998; Shouls et al, 1999). In the WHSSB survey, 29% cited their own health or disability problems as a barrier to seeking work, while 12% pointed to their children's health and disability problems. This topic is further discussed in a later section of the report.

Surprisingly perhaps, given the extent of women's caring role, only three respondents not in paid employment said that they were combining childcare with other caring responsibilities, though two employed lone parents had taken on this responsibility, one for five hours a week and the other for twenty. The small number of carers may be attributable to the age of respondents, most of whom are in their twenties and thirties, whereas it is women in the 40-59 age group who are most likely to be carers (www.csu.nisra.gov.uk, Table 12.1).

Research demonstrates that a lack of appropriate formal qualifications is a barrier to employment (Social Policy Research Unit, 1995). A sizeable minority of non-employed

respondents appeared to understand this and to have aspirations towards returning to work at some future stage, as 31% were not looking for work because they were studying or training. There was evidence from the focus groups that lone parents may choose to stay at home while their children are very young but later seek education and training to enhance their economic prospects:

I wanted very much to be there for the children. I didn't want to go out and leave them....Now they're at school I'm wanting to go back to education. I don't want a job, I want a career.

A quarter (25%) of the non-working parents said they lacked qualifications and skills to help them into work. For these lone parents, there may be many barriers to overcome before they can consider a return to education, training or employment. These barriers may be practical or emotional. For one focus group participant, an abusive relationship had prevented her from acquiring work experience during her marriage. She said: *I wasn't allowed to work or practically to leave the house in case I looked at someone else.*' (This older woman had been able to regain confidence and help herself and others by setting up a local women's group which later acquired funding for an after-school club, of which she was the (paid) co-ordinator). In other cases, even amongst very young lone parents, there seemed to be a feeling of hopelessness about ever finding a job in their own locality:

The only work ever I done was factory work or chip shop work but as I said there, Dungiven, it's impossible to get a job. Impossible. And then again if you get a job, you've to get a baby sitter.

Where there is a perception that employment is difficult to find and insecure, parents may take a measured decision that they feel financially safer remaining on benefits:

Places are closing down all the time and even in shops like they're not taking anyone on. And even if I do get a job like, what am I supposed to do? If you get a job you have to pay your housing, you know your rent to the Housing Executive, and you have to pay your childcare. You still have to feed yourself during the week like, you know what I mean. You're better staying at home and not working....You have that many things to pay for when you're working, it wouldn't really be worth it.

You get trapped in the system, trapped in the benefit system. You're thinking, 'God, if I do this...?'. You're worried about change. You're so scared. I've been on it (social security) that long I'm so scared, you know but I want to do it (look for paid work) but I'm so scared of the change because you're so used to having this regular money coming in. It's just the change, you know. But there's a bit more help out there nowthan what there would have been when my kids were younger.

The role of education and training

Focus group discussion identified some problems in rural areas in relation to accessing further education or training, particularly in terms of transport, availability and suitability of courses. This appeared to be less of a problem in the urban areas and some of these focus group participants spoke positively of their experiences of returning to education, whether on a Gingerbread or women's centre course or at a local further education college. It was not always clear, however that women returning to education necessarily view this as a direct preparation for a return to the world of employment, in the short term. Rather, it may be viewed in the first instance as a means of self development, confidence building, a social outlet or even as a contribution to good parenting:

The children are at school and I don't sit back and say well, I have to just be here. I

find that from I went back to part time/full time education a lot of things has changed in the house. I can help them with their school topics and they don't label me as a mum who knows nothing(mother of 3 teenagers).

I did a course there (FE College). It was called Returners and it was really good. I just finished it there and I really enjoyed it. I found that myself, no-one pointed it out to me. It was in the newspaper.

To take my mind off my problems in the past, what I done was a friend of mine was saying that the Women's Centre was doing GCSE English and I actually went and done it and I put my wee boy in the crèche. He loved it and see, because he was content and happy, I thought it was great and you were mixing well with them that was in the same boat as you – you're not on your own like. And you get to go for your cup of tea – nothing like being at school and good craic.

Positive experiences of returning to education may lay good foundations for acquiring the qualifications that many lone parents require to secure well paid employment. As one questionnaire comment put it:

I just feel society is becoming more accepting of lone parents, but I feel it should be made easier for us to gain employment and for the training to help us. (questionnaire comment).

As this respondent is aware, funding for high quality educational and training courses is vital:

I used Gingerbread Choices programme from September 2003 till the funding ran out. I felt this service was invaluable. It helped me get back into education and to regain my confidence. I therefore feel that all should be done to lobby the government into providing funding³ (questionnaire comment).

It is worth noting that for those aspiring to a higher education qualification, the cost may be prohibitive and may entail other sacrifices, as this young woman reflecting on her intended uptake of a university place suggests :

I won't get my benefits so I'll just have to live off my mum. My mum's house is where I'll be staying. I'll probably have to move back to my parents' house so in that way I don't want to go but..... It's something I always wanted to do before but it's going to be real hard with the money and all.

For some respondents with a desire to return to full-time education, the withdrawal of benefits is a major disincentive:

I think it is a disgrace that just because you are in full-time education you do not receive money from the government as if you were unemployed. I think education should be encouraged in young mums like myself. We are studying for a future for ourselves and our child/children so we don't depend on the government as we can get jobs with our qualifications. Surely this is clear to anybody but why does the person who makes these rules not (see this)? Because of this, many teen mums have been unable to continue with their education as a result. It also makes it difficult for those of us who are determined to make a bright future (questionnaire comment).

These findings strongly suggest that lone parents are eager to embrace the educational and training opportunities that they believe will facilitate their return to worthwhile jobs in the labour market and a 'bright future' for them and for their children. However, regardless of the availability of education and training in the further and higher education, voluntary and community sectors, adequate funding, whether for agencies or individuals, remains a problem. Callendar and Kemp (2000) state that only around 3% of lone mothers in Britain are in full-time education. In their DfEE study of

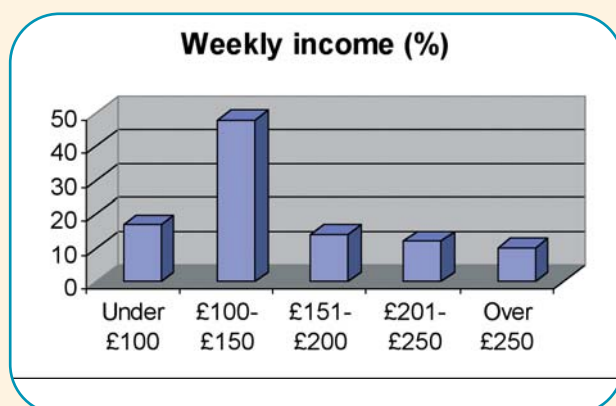
³ Funding for the Gingerbread 'Choices' programme has now been restored.

higher education students, they found that lone parents were the most likely of all students to build up high levels of debt and experience financial difficulties and hardship while studying. This was due to their greater reliance on the state for loans and benefits and their restricted employment opportunities because of their family responsibilities, all of which negatively impacted their academic studies. It remains to be seen whether the government's reforms to higher education funding, including the reinstatement of grants to the poorest students, will make any difference to lone parents' decisions regarding what Callendar and Kemp term 'an increasingly risky investment decision'.

Income and Living Standards

It is well established that becoming a lone parent has been associated with lower levels of income, poverty and deprivation. The first statistically reliable study of poverty in Northern Ireland (Hillyard et al, 2003), which used deprivation measures and a poverty threshold of £156.27 weekly income in 2002/03, found that 67% of lone parents were living in poor households. Figure 10 illustrates that two thirds of the WHSSB sample of lone parents were living on incomes of less than £150 a week (to include wages, benefits and maintenance payments, but not Housing Benefit).

Figure 10: Weekly income



Seventeen percent stated that they had under £100 and 48% had £100-£150. A further quarter had weekly incomes in the range £151 to £250, while only 10% said they had over £250 to live on, which is still well below Northern Ireland average weekly household income of £337 (Hillyard et al, 2003).

In a recent major British longitudinal study of lone parents (Marsh and Vegeris, 2004), the average earned weekly by **working** lone parents was £170 (£5.72 an hour). Only sixteen per cent earned more than £250 a week. The authors of this study comment that the typically shorter hours worked by lone parents (average 29 hours a week) tended to hold down earnings. In the WHSSB sample, low income is strongly correlated with not being in paid employment, with 82% of non-employed respondents stating an income of £150 a week or less. Only three non-employed respondents had incomes of £250 a week or more and in these cases, income was boosted by the receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and/or Carers Allowance and Widowed Parent Allowance. On the other hand, not surprisingly, full-time employment is clearly associated with a better weekly income: 70% of those working full-time (though this is only 20 respondents) were receiving over £200 per week. The income differential is less significant for part-time workers, with only a third (33%) of these 21 respondents achieving a weekly income above £200.

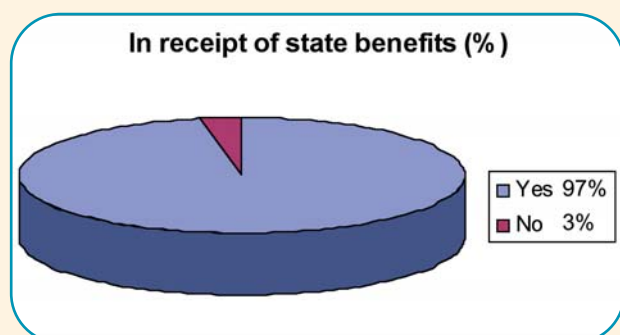
For many lone parents living on a low income, providing the basic necessities, particularly for school age children, is problematic and divisive:

Because of lack of money it is impossible to provide school uniforms, shoes, bags, leisure activities, sports kits, outing, stationery. All this of course serves to further emphasize the gap between those who "have" and those who "have not" (questionnaire comment).

Given these low levels of income, it is hardly surprising that high levels of dependence on state benefits and of debt were reported by the sample.

Uptake of Social Security Benefits

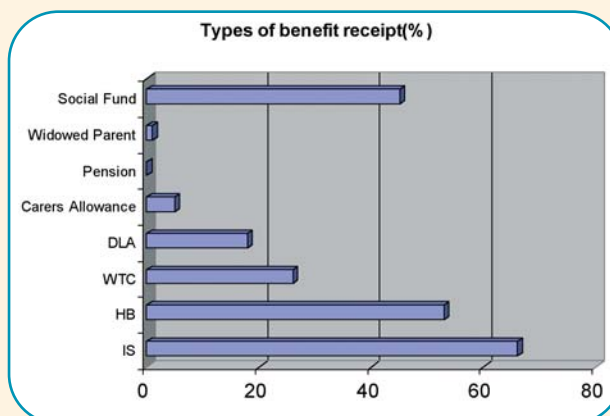
Figure 11: % in receipt of state benefits



In Northern Ireland in 2002/03, 70% of adults were in receipt of some form of state benefit (including Child Benefit and Retirement Pension) (www.csu.nisra.gov.uk, Table 5.1). All but four of the 147 respondents (97%) in this survey stated that they were in receipt of at least one state benefit, excluding Child Benefit: see Figure 11.

Marsh and Vegeris (2004), in the study cited above, note a strong long-term continuity in lone parents' benefit receipt. For instance, 54% of their respondents who were on Income Support in 1991 and who subsequently remained alone, remained on Income Support, while more than a third of those on Family Credit in 1991 were receiving Working Families Tax Credit in 2001. Over the 10 years of this study (1991 to 2001), for a majority of the lone parent families, circumstances improved, but one third remained in hardship, without a job or a new partner and dependent on Income Support. Those who were able to manage on benefits, without hardship or debt, were a minority: typically non-smoking older lone parents, formerly married or widowed with child support payments or disability benefits, or non-dependent children in the household.

Figure 12: Types of benefit receipt



In Northern Ireland in February 2003, 35,426 female lone parents and 2,596 male lone parents were in receipt of Income Support (Breitenbach and Galligan, 2004). Figure 12 shows that two thirds of all WHSSB respondents were claiming Income Support (although only 53% ticked Housing Benefit (HB)). Forty five percent had taken a loan from the Social Fund. Twenty six per cent of the whole sample population were receiving Working Tax Credit (WTC) and the fact that this represents 38 of the 41 in work respondents (91% of those in all forms of employment) underlines the importance of this benefit in supporting lone parents and others who may be in low paid work, although the withdrawal of other benefits may be a problem:

I think the Family Tax Credit was a very good incentive to get lone parents back to work, however Housing Benefit was taken from me and I found that quite hard to begin with. (questionnaire comment).

This focus group participant stressed the importance of tax credits in encouraging her to return to work (despite her ambivalence about leaving her young baby):

I couldn't afford not to, you know, with these working tax credits and child tax credits, it is financially worth your while to go back to work. There is no way I could afford to

manage (otherwise)...only for them I couldn't manage. I am actually relying on them to live.

Another respondent endorsed the government's aim of treating all families equally through the provision of in-work benefits:

Introducing Working and Child Tax Credit benefited lone parents and families with both parents. Made me feel more on an equal footing with other families. (questionnaire comment).

Disability Living Allowance (DLA) was being claimed by 18% of the sample (26 people). This is high rate compared with the 8.7% Northern Ireland population wide uptake of DLA (McWhirter, 2004) and also considering the relative youthfulness of respondents but this may, as noted above, reflect higher levels of morbidity among lone parents compared to couple parents. It also almost matches the number of respondents (25) who stated that they were not looking for work due to health or disability problems.

Rather more puzzling are the figures for Carers' Allowance and Widowed Parent Allowance. Seven people said that they were receiving the Carers' Allowance, although, as we have seen above, only five respondents had stated that they were carers. Similarly, while five respondents were widowed, only one ticked Widowed Parent Allowance in the appropriate section of the questionnaire. These discrepancies may be attributable to misunderstandings of the question, to confusion about the names of the benefits or to a failure to take up a benefit to which they were entitled.

Under 'other benefits', one respondent stated Incapacity Benefit, one Job Seekers Allowance and seven Child Tax Credit.

Consumer Goods

To what extent are lone parents members of the consumer society? This issue was tested by asking respondents whether they owned a small range of consumer goods which many families in Northern Ireland now would expect to possess. Survey figures are compared with data from the Continuous Household Survey (CHS)(www.csu.nisra.gov.uk, Table 4.1).

Figure 13: Consumer goods

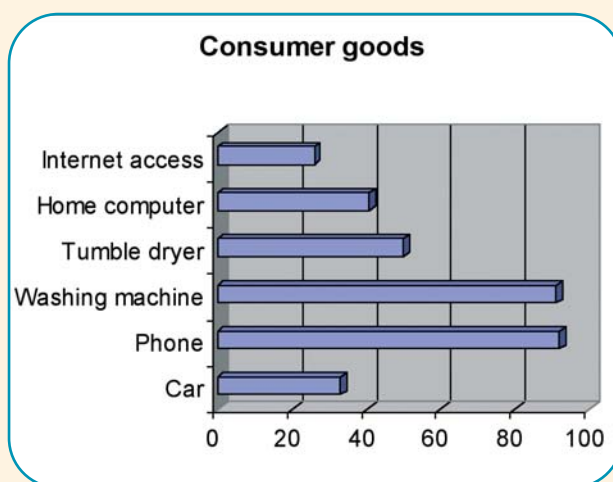


Figure 13 shows that 92% had a telephone or mobile phone and the same percentage had a washing machine. This compares favourably with 2003/04 CHS figures for the population as a whole, where 94% had a telephone and 95% a washing machine. Half of respondents owned a tumble dryer (CHS figure 53%). Forty one percent of the lone parent households had a computer, compared to 51% of all Northern Ireland households but only 26% had home internet access (CHS figure 40%). Car ownership was limited to a third of the sample (33%). This finding is in strong contrast with car ownership in Northern Ireland as a whole, which stands at 74% and can be clearly linked to these lone parents' difficulties with transport and access to services which are discussed in later sections of the report.

It should be noted that these figures may mask real levels of deprivation and poverty

among some lone parents, as this statement from a focus group participant who had been homeless for a time illustrates:

When I got a house they told me I should get a thousand pound for to do up your house for I had nothing and I was renting a fully furnished place before. She says, 'you are entitled to a thousand pounds because you were homeless', but when I went to find out about it they wouldn't give me it because they said I was working. I hadn't a cooker, I hadn't a fridge, I hadn't a bed to lay on or nothing. I applied for a crisis loan and they said I wasn't entitled to that too so I just had to wait to get all my bits and bobs. I was lucky I was in the house I was with all wooden floors or her or I would probably be still sitting on concrete, like.

Where lone parents have difficulty in accessing financial help from social security or are reluctant to seek help from this source, family members may be called upon:

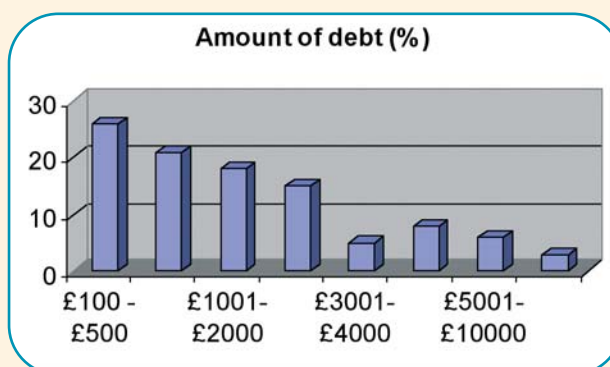
I have a very badly worn carpet in the hall and at the foot of the stairs and landing and to replace it I was always putting other important things first. When it come to replacing the carpet, it was actually my brother who paid for the carpet to be replaced. And now that's a basic thing and you would have thought I should have been able to say, 'Right, I have the money to get that replaced'.

The 2002/03 Family Resources Survey reported that 81% of single parent households have no savings, compared to 43% of all Northern Ireland households (www.dsdni.gov.uk/publications). As savings are a significant shield against poverty and debt, the levels of indebtedness revealed in the following section come as no surprise.

Debt⁴

Three quarters of the 147 lone parents reported being in debt. Table 14 shows the extent of this indebtedness, while Figure 15 gives a breakdown of the nature of the debt. (Respondents could tick more than one source of debt).

Figure 14: Amount of debt

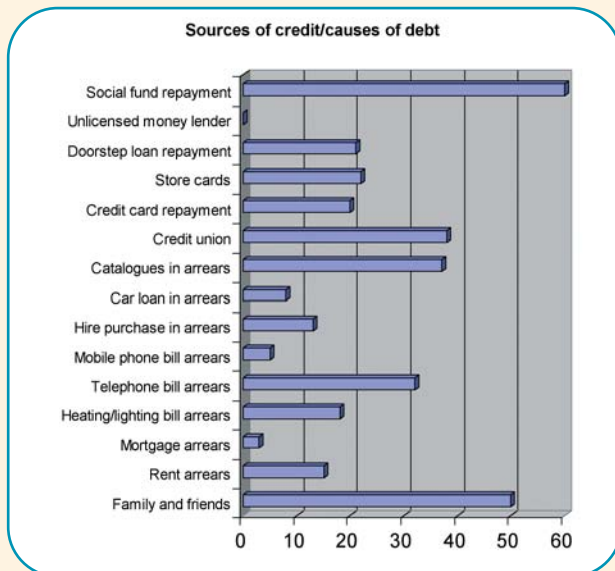


Nearly half of those in debt owed less than £1,000 (25% owed £100-£500 and 21% £501- £1,000). It should, however, be noted that on a very limited weekly income, even these sums may seem unmanageable. Another 44% of this group owed between £1,001 and £5,000 and most worryingly, for a 10% minority, their debt was more than this, with three people claiming to owe over £10,000. (Respondents were specifically asked not to include mortgage repayments, unless these were in arrears).



⁴ Please note that in this section, percentages generally refer only to those who stated that they had debts, not to the whole sample population.

Figure 15: Sources of credit/causes of debt



Turning now to the nature of the debt incurred by these respondents (Figure 15), 60% had taken a loan from the Social Fund, which is available to those on Income Support and has to be repaid out of the weekly benefit. After this, the most likely option for lone parents is to borrow from family and friends, with half stating that they had done so. Also popular were borrowings from the Credit Union (38%) and from credit cards (20%) or store cards (22%). These latter may, of course, be manageable forms of borrowing, if paid off regularly and on time, but of concern may be the levels of arrears reported by respondents: topping the list of arrears at 37% was debt to catalogue companies, while 36% had telephone (landline or mobile) arrears, 18% were in arrears with heating/lighting bills, 15% with rent, 13% with hire purchase, 8% with car loans and 3% with mortgage repayments.

One in five (21%) of those in debt said that they owed money to doorstep lenders. It is highly possible that respondents are paying a high rate of interest on this particular form of borrowing, which is often available to those who cannot obtain credit elsewhere. A report in the 'Belfast Telegraph' (17/6/04) quoted an average annual percentage rate (APR) of 177%

charged by door-to-door lenders and in December 2004, on the advice of the Office of Fair Trading, an investigation into the home credit industry by the Competition Commission was announced ('The Guardian', 21/12/04). A number of respondents mentioned other forms of debt, such as 'commercial loan', 'student loan', 'bank loan', unsecured loan 'overdraft', 'interest free credit' and 'arrears in local clothes shop'.

Debt is a sensitive topic, which was not thought to be appropriate for direct discussion in the focus groups, so there is little information as to how respondents were dealing with this issue. However, an English study of the advice needs of lone parents (Moorhead et al 2004) has found that over one half of lone parents with significant debt problems were not seeking any advice.

Summary

Section 2 has explored the demographic and socio-economic circumstances of respondents, including housing, employment and income status. The next section turns to the vital issue of childcare.

3. CHILDCARE ISSUES

In the preceding section of this report, a picture emerges of lone parents and their children in the WHSSB area who are for the most part living on low incomes, dependent on state benefits and experiencing high levels of debt. Less than a third are in paid employment, either full or part-time. If, as the government believes, work is the route out of poverty, it follows that good quality, affordable childcare is a crucial element in easing the passage to employment, particularly for lone parents.

The government acknowledged this by setting up the National Childcare Strategy (1998), by introducing childcare components as part of in-work benefits such as the Working Tax Credit and through other policy strategies such as the provision of free nursery education for four year olds and a commitment to ‘wraparound childcare’ in the form of after school and school based childcare. In the past, childcare provision in Northern Ireland has been poor in comparison with the rest of the UK or Europe (Hinds 1991) but there have been some recent signs of improvement. In Northern Ireland in 2002, there were 42,652 daycare places, a rise of 39% since 1992, although the number of day nursery places, 62.4 per thousand children aged 0-4, was lower than in England, where it stands at 95 places per thousand children (ibid, 2003). Furthermore, recent research carried out among unemployed women attending job centres and community and women’s groups in Northern Ireland indicates that problems remain (Kinnear, 2003). This survey found that around half of respondents said that finding suitable childcare was their biggest barrier to securing employment and a further 17% said that cost was a major problem. A study commissioned by the Equality Commission, the Department for Employment and Learning and the four Childcare Partnerships (Gray and Bruegel, 2002) predicted an increased need for

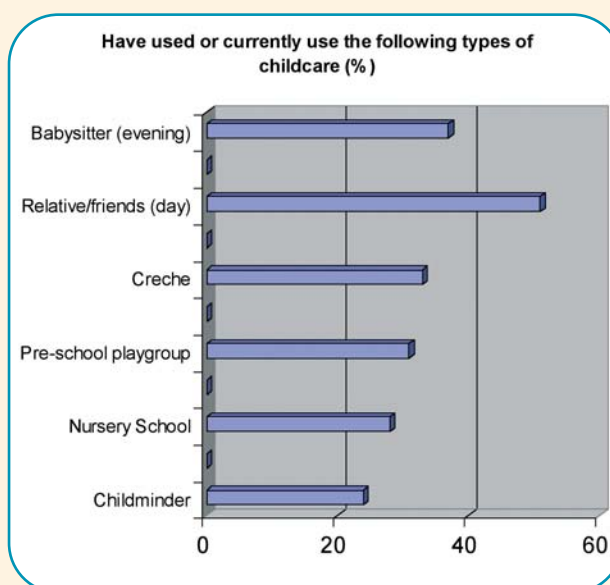
childminding, day nursery and after school places in Northern Ireland.

To what extent have lone parents in the WHSSB area benefited from recent policy developments and what is the nature of the childcare they are using, if any? This section explores childcare choices and through focus group and questionnaire comments, examines to what extent lone parents base their decisions regarding employment, education and training on the availability and affordability of childcare. This is, of course, not the sole reason for focusing on this issue as it is also important to all lone parents in terms of giving them a break from parenting and some time to themselves.

Types of childcare used

Surprisingly perhaps, 11% said that they did not or had not used childcare. Figure 16 depicts the arrangements chosen by the majority who did use childcare, often a mixture of options.

Figure 16: Types of childcare: current or past use



The most popular choice was daytime care by relatives. At 51% this is similar to the figure of

53% (for the care of pre-school children by a relative) given in the Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey (CHS)(www.csu.nisra.gov.uk, Table 15.1). The proportion using an evening babysitter (37%) may include relatives offering this service. Other forms of care were crèche (33%), pre-school playgroup (31%) and nursery school (28%). The least chosen option was that of childminder, although at 24%, this was higher than the 10% of CHS respondents who mentioned using this form of childcare for both pre-school and school age children. A few respondents mentioned other services, such as Gingerbread, after school club and Lifestart.

Cost

Lone parents completing the questionnaire were given the opportunity, if they wished, to state how much they were paying to have their children looked after and whether they received any help with the costs; and to make a comment on whether or not they were satisfied with the childcare on offer. Not everyone completed these sections, but of those that did:

- 11 parents (20%) said their childcare was free
- 22 parents (39%) were paying less than £50 a week for childcare
- 18 parents (33%) were paying more than £50 a week.
- 5 parents either said that they didn't know how much their childcare cost or paid hourly as necessary.

Fifteen per cent (n21) of the 147 lone parents surveyed stated that they received some form of help with the cost of childcare. For twelve parents, help was being delivered through tax credits (described as 'child tax credit', 'Working Tax Credit' or 'tax credit'). It is likely that this form of financial assistance was under-reported, since 38 respondents had previously reported claiming Working Tax Credit

and would be eligible for the childcare component. Three respondents specified help via New Deal, while others individually mentioned Surestart, Enterprise Ulster, family, university subsidy, school and SAMS Project, WELB.

Satisfaction with childcare

Forty seven people made a comment in the questionnaire on their satisfaction or otherwise with their childcare. The majority of the comments were favourable, praising the quality of the services, convenient location, good facilities, flexibility and friendly staff. Less satisfied comments highlighted the difficulty of finding childcare close to home:

I have found that there isn't enough childminders in my area that are registered and I've no transport to get the kids there, it's very hard and stressful (questionnaire comment)

These parents wanted more availability and help with the costs. It should also be noted here that 48% of the overall sample cited childcare arrangements as a stress in their lives. This is illustrated by a focus group participant, talking about the difficulties of finding care for her children whilst trying to hold on to her job:

It's hard to get anybody to come and watch that age group (aged 11 – 12).....They didn't want the after-school club because there was nobody their own age. I have to think of them, you know what I mean. No point in them being put with all youngsters, you've got to keep them happy. And so then I thought I'd go and get a registered child minder to watch them but I couldn't get anybody for their age... and for that year it was difficult. I had to go between family and friends and it was the first year of being broke up and he (ex husband) was being really difficult, so I couldn't get him to watch them at that time and I had to keep my job and he wouldn't watch them and there was

one day I had to leave them on their own and I was in nerves. That was the end. I couldn't do that again. I found that really, really difficult.

For both working and non-working lone parents in the focus groups, childcare was a burning issue, whether to support employment, a social life or to give parents some necessary time to themselves:

The one thing lone parents need help with is childcare, if you are going back to work.

Childcare is the most important thing. If there's no child care there's no point in anything else. Even to come and talk to somebody about what you need to do, the wains are running round and you need a crèche there where you can put the wain in and then talk to somebody. If there's no child care there's no point in anything else.

If you are up in the family court, until you're called you might be sittin' all day from ten in the morning until the afternoon. What do you do with your wains? You're farming them out and worrying all day are they all right. You know people work, there's no childcare and you have no money anyway so you're farming them out to whoever will take them. You don't have no choice because if you don't go to court you're in contempt of court.

There was some evidence that the childcare component of Working Tax Credit was easing the financial burden for employed lone parents but availability of childcare at the right time is another issue, particularly in rural areas:

It's OK if you have a day time job but if you want to go for a job in the evening, there is no child care. Even to go back to talking about doing classes and stuff, I can't get anybody to look after my wee one if I want to go and do courses..... There's no facilities for the evening and I don't like relying on the

family because they live at the other end of the county and it's a lot of distance to travel. Plus I don't drive and transport in this county is dire.

Formal and informal childcare

Research demonstrates that lone parents have a strong preference for informal (care by relatives and friends) rather than formal childcare (childminders, day nurseries and children's centres) (One Parent Families, 2003), although formal childcare is used by 37% of lone parent families in Northern Ireland and by 42% of working lone parents (Gray and Bruegel, 2002). In the WHSSB survey, both working and non-working lone parents said that family members and friends were an important and appreciated source of help, often trusted more than other sources:

When you've young children you need to make sure the child care's good, you don't just farm them out to anybody.

but sometimes such help was precluded by geographical distance, lack of transport or an unwillingness to impinge upon family generosity too often:

It's just that I don't like leaving them with my mother, you know, she has brought up twelve bairns so she deserves some time to herself and she's elderly. ...I don't like to because she's not fit.

I think what would make life better for me at the minute would be some way of allowing me to expand my social life. In the evenings, apart from family and a very few close friends, it's me and my baby....People offer to look after her but you can't keep going back time and time again. If (only) there was somebody I could trust and I could pay and use regularly to look after my child a couple of hours on a Saturday or Friday.

An aspect to be considered in relation to the use of informal rather than formal childcare is the possible effect on job stability. Kinnear (2003) cites American research by Hofferth and Collins (1997) which found that mothers who relied on parental or self care of children, and mothers who did not have easy local access to centre-based childcare, were more than twice as likely to leave a job as those who used centre based care. Furthermore, Kinnear states that 'the use of non-market care is strongly and inversely associated with the mothers' income' (ibid:15); there is an association between part-time working and the use of family members to care for children, and low earning women may be forced to use unpaid care.

Summary

This section has analysed the use of childcare by both employed and non-employed lone parents in the WHSSB area and has considered issues in relation to cost, availability, satisfaction and preferences for informal and formal care. The next section focuses on the physical and emotional well being of the lone parents.

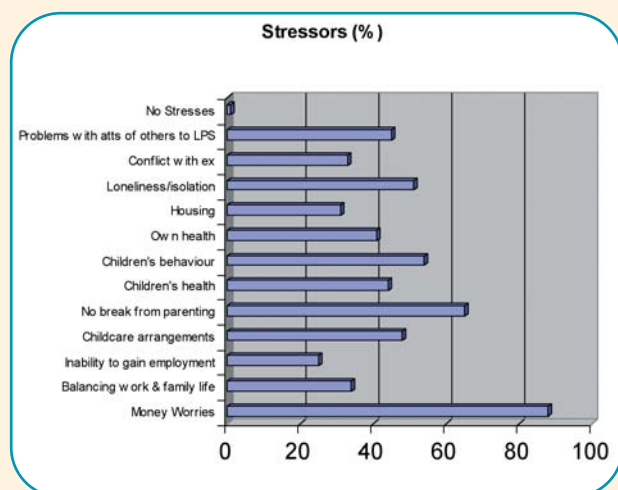
4. THE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL BEING OF LONE PARENTS

This section of the report discusses the physical and emotional well being of 147 lone parents in the WHSSB area and gathers evidence about their help seeking behaviour and use of services. Research has established the link between lone parenthood and heightened vulnerability to health problems. The questionnaire included questions asking respondents to report on the issues which cause them stress and to comment on their concerns about their own health or their children's health.

Social and Emotional Stresses

Figure 17 represents answers to the question 'what do you feel are the main stresses facing you as a lone parent?' (Respondents could tick more than one box).

Figure 17: Stressors



Fully 99% of respondents reported having stresses in their lives. Only one lone parent reported none. The overwhelming majority (88%) cited money worries as a stressor, a finding which is hardly surprising given the economic circumstances revealed in earlier sections. Two thirds (65%) were bothered by not getting a break from parenting and more than half by worries about their children's behaviour (55%) or by loneliness and isolation

(51%). There was ample evidence from the focus groups illustrating how these factors can interact to produce often intolerable pressures on lone parents:

It's stressful and there's the isolation, you know, lots of things. You are the main person. You are responsible for everything and then there is the money – you have to manage your money, you have to be a disciplinarian. You have to be everything and OK, you might have a good network of friends and family who can support you but you're there all the time, you're where the buck stops. It's very, very hard work and it's lonely.

Being the sole parent means that there is no one to whom responsibilities can be passed in order to gain much needed time for relaxation:

We do the job of two people. You have to do everything, whereas in another family with a mother and father, the father could put them in bed one night and read the story and you could sit and watch Big Brother,

Shortage of money also impacts on the ability to enjoy a social life, as this older mother reflects:

When you have children, and now my two, I wouldn't part with them for all the money in Ireland and I'm sure every girl here's the same, but when you have children you don't have a night life. To get a night out you pay a baby sitter, you pay a taxi to get here or there, it's very, very costly. Ninety nine per cent of the time, for a girl or even a woman of my age, you can't afford it. You just can't afford it, for if you do find a baby sitter, young ones these days is looking for a powerful amount of money for a couple of hours for you. Then you pay a taxi to get there and then your night's drink or whatever when you get there. Nearly a week's money, no matter what you think.

Childcare features as an important issue here, with nearly half of respondents (48%) citing it as a concern. Also in relation to children, more parents were worried about their children's health (44%) than their own health (41%). For 45% of respondents, other people's attitudes to lone parents were problematic, suggesting that many still feel a sense of stigma in relation to their status, which could have repercussions for health and well-being. One third (33%) reported stress arising from conflict with their ex partner, while 31% had problems with housing. Less than a quarter (24%) identified stress arising from an inability to find employment, though this proportion is higher than expected, given that only 16% of those not in employment stated that they were currently seeking to re enter the labour market. These figures may to some degree reflect an aspiration towards employment combined with a perception that it is currently not feasible, for a variety of reasons (as outlined earlier). Finally, two individuals identified problems with 'getting time to study' as their particular stressor.

Parents' Health

Two follow up questions further explored respondents' self-reported health concerns. The first question asked respondents to identify a range of specific health issues. Fifty per cent of respondents had problems with sleep and 41% with eating too much or too little. McWhirter (2004:147) states that in 2002/03, twenty six per cent of both women and men in Northern Ireland were current smokers and that one third of men but only 11% of women drank alcohol at 'more than the sensible recommended level'. For 36% of WHSSB respondents, smoking was a concern, while 5% admitted to dependence on alcohol and 9% to dependency on prescribed drugs. It could be argued that sleeping problems may be transient for a population with young children (49% under 5) but certainly, lack of sleep may bear more heavily on someone who is parenting alone. Eating too much is likely

to point to comfort eating and eating too little to lack of money to fund a good diet. The numbers with alcohol and prescribed drugs problems are also of concern. However, the most striking finding is that 57% of survey respondents stated that they were affected by depression and 48% by anxiety.

The second follow up question invited respondents to describe in their own words any other concern which they felt about their own physical and/or mental health. About a quarter answered this question (n38). A number of replies reiterated issues tracked in the preceding questions, with more than half describing symptoms related to stress, tiredness, anxiety and depression: 'can require hospitalisation for depression'; 'nowhere to relieve stress, relax or get a break'; 'panic attacks'; 'afraid of not being able to cope'; 'no help with childcare if they are ill'. Other answers identified a range of physical illnesses such as epilepsy, fibromyalgia, back pain, chest pain, a heart attack and recovery from alcohol problems. One parent wrote: 'had a serious illness before –worried it may return' and another: 'I worry that I'm being stretched too thin and that my health is suffering. What will happen to my children?'

The focus groups provided an opportunity to further explore the high incidence of depression, stress and anxiety identified in the questionnaire survey. The following participants combined an ability both to articulate what they had experienced and to locate it within the particular circumstances of being a lone parent, which may combine grief for a lost relationship, poverty, the strains of parenting alone and worries for the future:

'I remember after my child was born I was really, really drowning and it was for about a year, like, I was really, really depressed and I remember my mother saying to me – 'what are you depressed about, sure you're only young?'. And I was like – I'm just after having

a wain and splitting up with my boyfriend and the rest of it and people think you can't get depressed because you're young but see when you're on your own with a child like, it's just you on your own all the time. And you think, where are you going to be in ten years time, like where are you going to be, are you going to have a child at you and are you going to have provided good enough to help her succeed? It can really worry you about them getting older and questions that they are going to ask'.

'I think it's very easy to slip into depression because at the end of the day you're probably not eating at regular times because you're seeing to the baby – you're not getting your sleep and it's very easy to slip into depression. And at the end of the day too you're probably grieving for the relationship that you've lost. It's like a bereavement, it's like a death because you have lost that other person. I think it's very easy to slip into depression. You're not eating, you're not sleeping, you're worrying about money.

The above participants were young women, who might perhaps be expected to recover their equilibrium over time but the experience of one older woman is indicative of the possible longer term health effects of lone parenthood for some individuals. This woman, who had for some time been the lone mother of three teenagers, was convinced that her recent heart attack could be attributed to the effects of stress alone:

Participant : Well, I had a heart attack in January and I had no factors like cholesterol or high blood pressure or anything like that. Apart from being plump, stress was the main thing.

Interviewer: Really?

Participant : Yes, there were no other factors. I was perfectly OK like with

cholesterol dead low, blood pressure dead low. You know all the other main factors – don't smoke, seldom drink.

Interviewer: So you attribute it yourself to stress.

Participant: Yes. Stress.'

(This woman was continuing to work full-time in order to finance her children's higher education).

In the longitudinal study of a cohort of British lone parents (Marsh and Vegeris 2004), more than half (55%) reported some long-term illness during the 10 year study period, including mental problems, especially anxiety and depression. Poor health was associated with remaining alone (rather than re-partnering). It is worth noting here again that three quarters of WHSSB respondents were in their twenties and thirties. In Northern Ireland, only 14% of females aged 16-44 in 2003/04 reported any long-standing illness which limited their daily activities (www.csu.nisra.gov.uk, Table 6.5), though Breitenbach and Galligan (2004:50) report that in Northern Ireland '24% of (all) women showed signs of a possible mental health problem.' These figures may provide a context within which to consider the findings in this section.

Children's health

Previous research in Northern Ireland (Evason et al, 1998) has identified concerns about children's health as a barrier to lone mothers' return to work. This issue was probed in the current survey, both by including it in the list of possible stressors (see above, where 44% of parents identified worries about their children's health as a stress) and by inviting respondents to comment further in their own words about their children's health. Twenty nine per cent (n42) gave specific details. Nine parents said that their child suffers from

asthma and five stated that their children were hyperactive. For six parents, the major concern was whether their children were eating enough nutritious food, as this comment illustrates:

I worry about their health. Ideally I would like to be able to buy healthy organic food, but it's a case of what I can afford and what they will eat. I'm unable to throw food away and cook something else. (questionnaire comment).

The inability to provide a good diet for children is of course linked to low income:

I have to rely on school meals and don't find them very nutritional. Sometimes have to opt for filling, inexpensive, un-nutritional food for them, which causes allergies. (questionnaire comment).



The experiences of these parents in relation to feeding their families are also reflected in research carried out nationally by the children's charity NCH amongst families living on low incomes, half of whom were lone parents (NCH 2004). This study found that more than a quarter of the children never ate green vegetables or salad and that lack of money sometimes made it impossible for parents to provide their children with a nutritious diet. Four out of five parents said

they would buy their children healthy food if they had an extra £10 a week.

The remaining answers in relation to children's health covered a wide range of physical, emotional and behavioural problems. This topic is further discussed in a later section of this report.

Summary

Section 4 has explored issues relating to the physical and emotional health of lone parents and their children. It has highlighted not only physical health concerns, but also high levels of stress, anxiety and depression in the sample population. To whom do these parents turn for help with their problems, if anyone? This is the topic of the next section.

5. LONE PARENTS' USE OF SERVICES

Two recent UK research studies have examined the advice seeking behaviour of lone parents. Moorhead et al (2004) found that they have greater advice needs than other family types. The three most common problem areas in their survey were benefits, contact with the absent parent and debt. Respondents' problems tended to be long-lasting (over a year), particularly in the case of loneliness, depression and other health-related issues. In a survey carried out by Buck et al (2004), lone parents were significantly more likely than other family types to have experienced a justiciable problem; that is, a problem related to divorce, post-relationship conflict, domestic violence and problems relating to children, or rented housing problems. This study reports that lone parents find trying to resolve problems particularly stressful, though there were rewards as a result of making the effort to do so.



The preceding section strongly suggests that many lone parents in the WHSSB area may be carrying a heavy burden of stress, depression, tiredness and worry about their own or their children's health and well-being. To which services do these parents turn for help and support, if any? Respondents were asked to indicate if they had used any one or more of a range of services about problems or stresses in their lives and if so, for what reason. They were also asked to state whether the service had been helpful or not.

Figure 18: Use of services

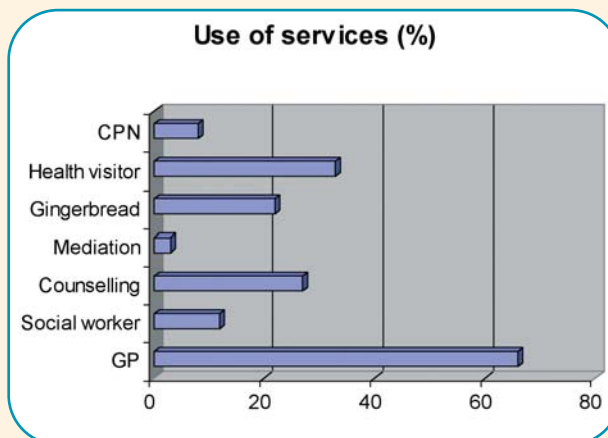


Figure 18 shows that **GPs** were the most likely service to be contacted (by 66% of respondents). In terms of the nature of the problems for which GPs were consulted, it is significant that once again depression and anxiety in one form and another are highly represented. Forty seven per cent of consultations with a GP were because of depression. There were 16 comments regarding anxiety. Apart from 'general ill health' (6 respondents), 'problems with children's health' (8), smoking (4), other reasons for consultation included asthma, blood pressure, fibromyalgia, back problems, headaches, stomach and bowel problems, epilepsy, allergies, thyroid and heart problems and ovarian cancer.

Rather surprisingly, only a third of respondents indicated that they had consulted a **health visitor**. The reasons covered a range of childhood health and behavioural issues. Twenty seven per cent had used the services of a **counsellor**. Nearly half of those who gave a reason for doing so stated that it was because of depression and anxiety. Other reasons mentioned included domestic violence, alcoholism, death of partner, sexual abuse and 'counselling for child after break up'.

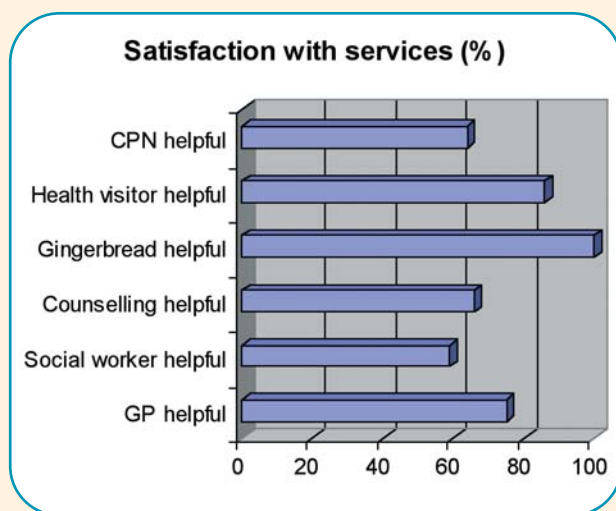
Other respondents reported using agencies and services such as **Gingerbread** (22%),

social worker (12%), **community psychiatric nurse** (CPN) (8%) or **mediation** (3%). Reasons given for using Gingerbread's services were for advice, to do a course, to use the crèche and for social reasons such as combating loneliness and isolation, 'time to myself' and to meet other lone parents. Only twelve comments were recorded regarding reasons for seeing a social worker; these were mostly in relation to children but also included depression. Five reasons were given for consulting a CPN: depression, including post natal depression, post traumatic stress and breakdown.

Which services do lone parents find helpful?

Figure 19 indicates satisfaction ratings for the services discussed above (where these were stated).

Figure 19: Satisfaction with services



Health care professionals

Amongst health and social care professionals, health visitors were given the highest approval rating by survey respondents, with 87% of those giving an opinion saying that the service had been helpful (38 out of 48 respondents). Here a focus group participant pays tribute to the support received from a long experienced health visitor:

She was my health visitor when I was a wain and she has been in the job so long that she knows her stuff. She was brilliant and even when she wasn't the health visitor I could have still phoned her and she would have given me support and talked to me and stuff like that. I think she went above and beyond (the call of duty) really, so maybe that wasn't her remit, which is something they maybe need to look at. Maybe it was her as a person, she cared enough.

Three quarters (75%) of those who had used GP services were satisfied. However, some focus group participants expressed dissatisfaction with their GPs' treatment of their depression and felt that they should have been offered more than a prescription for anti-depressants:

Well – the doctor sort of shouted at me. She shouted at me and said, 'Well, you have to take these tablets' so there wasn't much support, no, only from my own family.

I was offered anti-depressants time and time again and I refused them for a long time. I think I waited until the summer holidays when I knew I was off work and wasn't going to be driving. So then I eventually did. (but was not helped).

Sixty six per cent of those surveyed who had used **counselling** were satisfied. Sixty four per cent of those consulting a **CPN** and 59% of those seeing a **social worker** said they had been helped; it must be emphasized however that numbers here are small, with seven out of only twelve people who had used CPN services indicating satisfaction and ten out of eighteen in relation to social workers. One focus group participant spoke of receiving counselling but feeling that it was too short-term to meet her needs:

I think she was a community nurse or a health worker. But I would have liked there to

be someone I could keep going to maybe once a month to talk things over because it really did make me feel better, you know, coming out of there. I told her about the panic attacks and that but she just said, 'I don't think you need to be seen again.'

Other services

In relation to other services, Gingerbread earned a very high approval rating (almost 100%), with 31 of the 32 survey respondents who had used Gingerbread services reporting that they had been helped. As one lone parent writing in the questionnaire about Gingerbread's services (training courses and childcare) said:

(Gingerbread) gives lone parents a fantastic chance to do something in your life for yourself which reflects on your family and builds confidence amongst lone parents. I appreciate what Gingerbread has done for me!
(questionnaire comment).

Only five respondents stated that they had used mediation and two said it had not been helpful, though in answer to a later question about relationships with an ex-partner, one respondent wrote: 'through mediation have built up trust'.

Twelve other agencies or sources of help were named by survey respondents. These were: smokers' helpline (4), local family centre(2) and Women's Aid, Al-Anon family group, alcohol centre, group therapy, hospital consultant and Surestart. No ratings for satisfaction or otherwise were recorded in the questionnaires in relation to these 12 agencies/help services. However, the focus groups provided much data on participants' use of a range of local services, including some of the above.

Gingerbread and other support groups

Several focus group participants had benefited from the use of Gingerbread services such as

a training course or the creche. In terms of more local contact with a Gingerbread group (in Omagh), one lone parent expressed a preference for evening meetings that could be attended by working lone parents:

The meetings for things are often during the day and if you're working, you don't get a chance. It would be nice to get out and meet people in the evenings. All right, there is a need during the day, yes, but there is also a need at the night time. I have never got to a Gingerbread meeting.

Several participants across the focus groups identified a need for support and contact with other lone parents (although one older woman was under the misapprehension that Gingerbread was only for young lone parents):

You need to be aware of support groups and people. If you don't know anyone in your area you need groups that you can go and meet people and talk to.

I feel like when you're in the house it is very boring. There should be more lone parent courses like Gingerbread, where you learn, make friends and get money as well. It would be great if Gingerbread got funding for the Choices programmes again⁵. (But) I feel that I cannot do a course because I can't afford the travelling costs or fees or childcare
(questionnaire comment).

This Co Fermanagh resident praised Gingerbread and called for a regeneration of local groups, though it should be noted that support groups are set up and disbanded autonomously by local lone parents:

I feel that there should be a regeneration of Gingerbread groups at local level. Through Gingerbread myself, I became more confident, took up training and became involved in a lot of community based projects and eventually set up and gained funding for an after schools club in

⁵ Funding for Choices programme now restored.

the area which I am now currently employed in (questionnaire comment).

Also in Co Fermanagh, much praise was given to two local centres:

The Arc is brilliant. ... I only moved into my house about a year ago and there was a lot of stuff I needed done but I was sick asking people. I went and spoke to one of the fellas at the Arc and in like three weeks there was a basic DIY course for women on. So I got into that and they were fantastic.

I think I have been quite lucky because Irvinestown has a Healthy Living Centre and it offers all sorts of advice services and for building up your social circle, there's groups for mums that have young children or older children and you can just meet for a cup of coffee and a chat and share your problems or cry or whatever you feel like doing.

Local Surestart centres were also warmly endorsed by users:

'If it wasn't for the Sure Start, some of the times I don't know where I'd have been. And that's being honest....Every parent needs somebody that they can trust and turn to. ...But you know I would come down here, I would pour my heart out to the staff down here before I'd go home.

There's a new person in this Sure Start and she's very good. She told me about the family fund so I applied for that....they are great now, they have been brilliant....they offer a lot of stuff that I didn't know was available and have courses like about self-esteem and everything. I find them good.'

One lone parent participant was also a Surestart worker and had this observation to make:

'I see people coming in – not only lone parents but other people too, you know, with

maybe post-natal depression or low self-esteem and we run courses for them and they can take time out and use the crèches, so you know I'm seeing it from the other end, where there are a lot of people being reached through the programmes, so I can see the long term benefits now.' (Surestart worker).

Although some lone parents are able to access help and support when needed, there was also evidence of a lack of information amongst others as to where to turn. This may particularly be the case in the early days of lone parenthood. This woman vividly describes her sense of turmoil and confusion then and her ongoing problems:

I didn't know who to turn to, yet I felt people were looking at me as if I was in a good position and had worked in a job where I should know exactly what to do. But I am still a person, I haven't experienced this (before), this is a new experience for me and it really – I was in turmoil, I didn't know where to turn. Even with the first solicitor that I got, it was a really bad experience – and with the house as well, you know, I wasn't sure what was gonna happen or if I was going to lose it. I'm still in the house but my husband wants half of everything – so if the house is £100,000, he wants £50,000 – it doesn't work that way but he's saying 'I want half'.

This participant and others emphasized lone parents' need for high quality advice and information but in Derry city at least, it was felt that there were a number of organisations offering services and that these needed to be better co-ordinated:

If there was one person from each organisation to form a one-stop-shop where lone parents could go and utilise the information from each place (agency) instead of running round banging your head off a brick wall. One place to go and one person to co-ordinate that. Go once, wains use the

crèche and you can find out all the information.

Summary

This section has surveyed respondents' use of helping services and their levels of satisfaction with these services. Apart from GPs, only a minority of the lone parents reported using the services of health professionals and other agencies. Among those that had availed of services, a majority stated that they had been helped. Much appreciation was expressed for services such as Gingerbread and Surestart, which deliver training, childcare and support services at a local level, although concerns were voiced about the viability and funding of these services.

6. PERCEPTIONS OF ATTITUDES TO LONE PARENTS.

The previous section profiled the physical and emotional well being of the 147 lone parents who were surveyed. An important aspect of health, well being and self-esteem relates to individuals' perceptions of how they are valued by society. Does marital and socio-economic status have any bearing on how people feel they are treated by others? In the questionnaire, a series of questions was asked which explored the lone parents' perceptions of how they were viewed by family and friends, by health professionals and by the government.

Is it the case that as family forms in twenty-first century Britain and Northern Ireland become more heterogeneous, lone parenthood, although still a minority form amongst parents of dependent children, carries less stigma than it once did? A previous report on the health and social care needs of lone parents in the Northern HSSB area in Northern Ireland (Spence, 1996) found that nearly four out of five of the lone parents surveyed then felt that government attitudes to them were unfavourable. Many commentators have argued that the Conservative government of the time showed both in its public statements and policies little sympathy for lone parents (Pascall, 1997; Lewis, 1998). New Labour has brought forth a raft of policies and programmes with the avowed aim of promoting social inclusion among lone parents and other disadvantaged groups. To what extent has the impact of these policies made lone parents feel that they are as valued as any other citizen?

In answer to the question 'are government attitudes towards lone parents favourable, unfavourable or neutral?':

- 13% felt that government attitudes were favourable

- 18% said that they were neutral
- 45% said that government attitudes were unfavourable
- 23% didn't know.

It is interesting that in comparison with the previous survey of lone parents in Northern Ireland (ibid), the proportion finding government attitudes to them unfavourable has fallen from 78% to 45%, suggesting that government may be making some headway in combating feelings of marginalisation among lone parents. However, nearly a quarter of the sample had no opinion on this issue and only 31% said that government attitudes were favourable or neutral. Among the factors which encouraged a perception that government now has a more positive attitude towards lone parents, respondents cited incentives to get lone parents back to work, lone parent advisors, courses and tax credits. On the negative side, there were more than 30 comments which highlight a continuing sense of stigma and which indicate that changes in policy are not perceived by many lone parents as instituting positive change in their lives. This questionnaire comment was typical: 'They give with one hand and take away with another. Feel like the dregs of society', while this focus group participant, for instance, was suspicious of the government's efforts to encourage lone parents into work through the New Deal:

We have to go to these meetings so you go but I haven't found them that helpful...It's just, "What are you doing now and why are you not going to work?" They're not forcing you out to work but they are asking you why you aren't in work. It's just the way I see it, the Government's trying to keep unemployment figures down. So they have you shoved in somewhere at £10 a week and it's took you off the unemployment. I don't find it very helpful.

On the other hand, a questionnaire comment expressed the opposite view:

I feel it's very hard sometimes to get "out of the system" of claiming benefit because of the price of rent and childminders etc and am in total favour of the support New Deal has to offer to lone parents.

In relation to health professionals' attitudes,

- 19% felt that health professionals' attitudes to lone parents were favourable
- 47% said they were neutral
- 14% felt that health professionals' attitudes to lone parents were unfavourable
- 20% didn't know.

While a fifth of respondents did not know what they thought about this issue, a minority (14%) felt that health professionals' attitudes to them were actually unfavourable. Comments from the questionnaire suggested that some professionals are perceived as having doubts about lone parents' ability to cope and can be 'patronising and condescending' and 'don't always listen to our concerns'. This may be felt particularly by younger lone mothers:

When I was pregnant with my first child, GPs, midwives etc, seemed to look down on me, which made me feel very bad because I was 19 and they thought I couldn't cope (questionnaire comment).

One focus group participant felt that in the maternity hospital she was being treated differently from other mothers:

I was in hospital and I don't know if it was me being over sensitive or what, but there was definitely something up with some of the nurses. Especially at visiting time they would be coming round and all, 'hello' to the nice couples sitting with a baby and kinda by-pass me.

But two thirds (66%) thought that the attitude of these workers was either favourable or neutral. There were positive comments such 'they give help when you need it' and 'not treated any differently', as well as 'not extra helpful, but not unhelpful' and '(you) always find good and bad everywhere'.

When asked about the attitudes of family and friends,

- 47% felt that family and friends' attitudes to lone parents were favourable
- 32% said that they were neutral
- 15% felt that family and friends' attitudes to lone parents were unfavourable
- 6% didn't know.

This was the group that was perceived as being best disposed towards lone parents. Only 6% had no opinion but four out of five respondents (80%) perceived family and friends as having either favourable or neutral attitudes towards them:

I get lots of help from families and friends. They appreciate the difficulties I face (questionnaire comment).



There is much evidence from the questionnaire and focus groups that lone parents look towards their families in particular for practical, emotional and financial help and support, although the picture can be a complex one. Some respondents wrote, 'they accept it', 'they have no choice', 'upset at first, then supportive', 'sometimes they are OK, other times they haven't a clue', 'they pity/feel sorry for me' and 'they have their own problems to consider'. From the 15% minority who felt that family and friends had unfavourable attitudes towards them came comments such as 'little or no contact with family', 'problem with ex's parents', 'people look down on you' and 'rarely offered/get any support'.

Focus group data provide further insight into the complexities of the relationships between lone parents, their family and friends and the local community. Families are asked, or offer, to provide money and household items to set up or re-establish a home for the lone parent and children, where the state through social security cannot provide. Often families, particularly mothers, are the preferred or only option for childcare. However, sometimes family support comes at the price of independence. This was particularly evident in the focus group which comprised mainly very young mothers. There was a tension between their appreciation of family support and their resentment that their own parenting role was being undermined, as this interchange demonstrates:

Person 1: When I was living with my parents, they were always giving their opinions and I felt I was bringing her up by their values instead of my own.

Person 2: Mine were the same. I lived with my parents (at first) and I felt they were trying to control the way the wain was being brought up. So that was why I got out, it was the only thing I could do.

Interviewer: So you really feel that now you are a mother, you want to be the parent of this child and that's difficult.

Person 3: Everybody's thinking because you're young you can't look after a wain but sure, how did they do it the first time they had one? You know you have to learn by your own experiences, not anybody else's.

The above exchange underlines the importance of providing services to young mothers which are both supportive of and sensitive to their autonomy as parents and young adults. (These particular young mothers were receiving services from their local Surestart centre). The same point regarding family support was brought up in another focus group by a young woman who was living with her child in her parents' home and finding difficulties with being part of her peer group and a parent:

I have great support from my mummy and my daddy and all but because I'm the youngest in the house I'm kinda her baby in a way – she's still very over protective. In one way if you want to go out on your own she would still be 'You can't be just going out' and this and that and saying, 'You have to live up to your responsibilities' and things like that. So I find it hard sometimes because all my friends are going away here and there and I don't get away as often. Although I do get away and they (parents) are very good, I don't get to run as much as I'd like, get a break.... I feel like I'm – not being put down but – I'm still getting told what to do, you know. Even though I'm grown up now I'm still being treated like a child myself sometimes.

An older woman then interjected humorously that this was true of older mothers too, as her own mother was 'coming round this afternoon to make my boys tidy up their bedroom'. Perhaps the point here is that at whatever age, family relationships, which can be a source

both of loving support and conflict, have to be negotiated.

Community attitudes

In terms of attitudes to lone parents by local communities, there was a general consensus in the focus groups that community attitudes were less censorious than they once had been. A woman in her late forties recalled the circumstances of her own birth and reflected that life was easier for today's young unmarried mothers, who would not be under the same pressure to terminate their pregnancies, have the baby adopted or leave the country:

My mother, she was sixteen when I was born. I wasn't allowed to be born in Ireland, I was born in Scotland, she had to go to Scotland. So that's the way it was years ago. But now, thank God, 99% of the mothers and the fathers (of the unmarried mother) looks after the wains and they're havin' their child....But then I have the old attitude – I would look at things like if the girl got pregnant I wouldn't be roaring at her because I was more or less not wanted and I wouldn't like another young girl coming through what my mother went through and that's being honest now. Young girls needs backing, you know.

However, in another group, a lone mother in her thirties from an urban area complained that even today, changed housing circumstances after leaving her abusive marriage led to discrimination against her:

I found that people's attitudes had a marked difference. We had a big fancy house but it was a façade because nobody knew what was going on behind it. I found people's attitudes changed from giving one address, I went to (address)..... I was really shocked at even doctors and the way they treated me because my address was, you know, it was like, 'you're a druggie' and

whatever they were thinking in their head. You were still the same person....I was so shocked by the marked difference, by the lack of respect and the looking down their nose that there was. Small mindedness'.

A lengthy and interesting discussion emerged in yet another group around the issue of other women or neighbours being suspicious if a divorced or separated lone parent seeks to socialise or to ask for help with practical chores:

Person 1:If you go out maybe with a few friends it's, 'Och, she must be out looking for a man'. But that's what they think, you're after another man. I don't want another one ever but there is some women feel that you might take my husband or that feel their husbands can't be seen talking to you.

Person 2: I was quite lucky because we sold the house and I have moved into a new development now and it's very much a fresh start. But you are probably right – they all are thinking, 'She's divorced, better not come out and talk'.

Person 3:You are reluctant to ask.... You know you can't get anybody to do anything for you.

In general, feelings of stigma about being a lone parent were more likely to be felt by older lone parents. Younger women mostly claimed not to feel any opprobrium about their status, though sometimes there was an element of youthful defiance about this:

Well, my ma says to me the other day in the car, she turns round and says, 'Are you not ashamed having a baby and no partner or anything?' and I says to her 'No!' and she goes, 'Well, in my day we would have been so ashamed, we wouldn't have left the house'. But I says to her, 'That's your problem, not mine 'cause I'm proud of my wain'.

An interesting finding from the lone fathers' focus group was that some felt that the sense of stigma or community disapproval which had once been visited upon female lone parents was now being directed towards them:

Twenty years ago there was an attitude to lone parents per se, .. a lone parent, if she was a woman was nearly a pariah, you know, how did she end up like that, why didn't she look after her man? So I think women got the worst initially... But there is another subliminal attitude lurking there – a man on his own with wains! What did he do to be left on his own with wains? He must have driven that woman to distraction! I think now that people are beginning to accept that marriages don't always work out and those prejudices against (female)lone parents are dropping, there is this stigma against male lone parents.

Summary

A majority of lone parents felt that health professionals and family and friends had favourable or at least neutral attitudes towards them, although some problematic areas were uncovered. Although 45% felt that government attitudes to lone parents were unfavourable, this is a much lower percentage than in a previous study of lone parents in Northern Ireland. Taken overall, these findings suggest more accepting attitudes towards lone parenthood and possibly, the positive effect of a greater range of government policies to help families in general.

7. CHILDREN AND FAMILY BREAKDOWN

An extensive academic literature in a number of countries has researched the impact of family breakdown on children (for a summary of over 200 studies, see Rodgers and Pryor (1998)) and in Northern Ireland, a recent research report (Bunting et al 2003) explored the experiences of young people growing up in one parent families. This topic was also surveyed in the present research. This section of the report notes the extent to which children in the 147 one parent families are in contact with their other parent. It examines the relationship of respondents with their ex-partner and that of children with the non-resident parent. A number of questions probed changes in children's behaviour following family breakdown (where relevant).

Contact with the non-resident parent

The first point to note is that 59% of respondents reported that their children were still in contact with their other parent (figure 20).

Figure 20: Contact with the other parent.

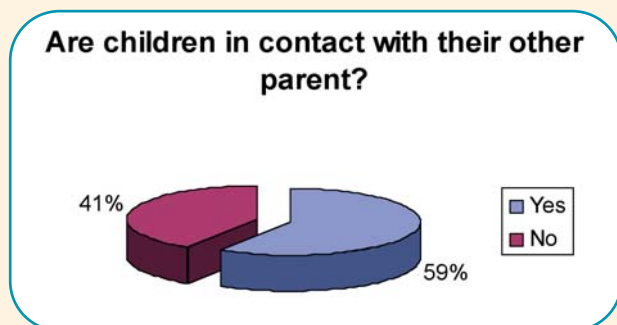
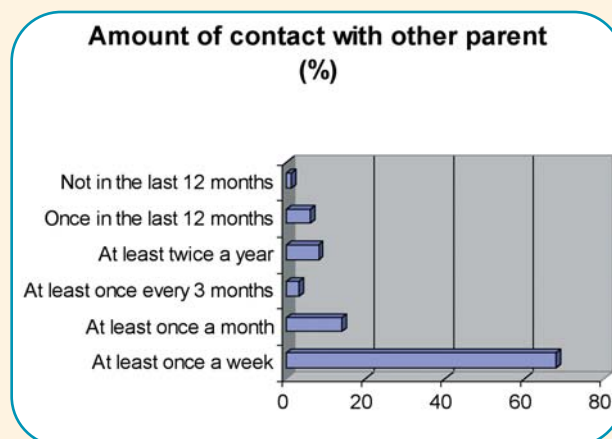


Figure 21 indicates the amount of time, according to these respondents, that their children spent with the non-resident parent. Eighty-two per cent of these children had had contact at least once a month (68% at least once a week and 14% at least once a month). Three per cent had seen their other parent at least once every three months, 8% twice a

year and 6% once in the last 12 months.

Figure 21: Amount of contact with other parent



The issue of paternal contact with children after family breakdown has recently been the subject of a campaign by a group of non-resident fathers and has garnered much media attention. It is clear that while residence and contact are matters for the courts, children may adjust to family change more easily if the parents are able to negotiate a new post separation relationship based on their role as parents and on the needs of the children. This research found that in over two thirds of the families where children were in contact with the non-resident parent, the contact was at least weekly, which suggests that these parents are making an effort to maintain or facilitate contacts. This matter was further explored through two questions which asked respondents whose children still had contact with their other parent to comment on their current relationship with their ex-partner and also on the children's relationship with him (or her, in one case). Turning first to the question regarding the relationship with the ex-partner, of the 85 respondents who gave an answer,

- 43% said the relationship was good
- 19% said it was fair
- 38% said it was unsatisfactory.

Relationship with ex-partner 'good' or 'fair'

The majority of these respondents judged their relationship with their former partner to be good or at least fair. Twenty seven of the 37 respondents who said their relationship was good gave reasons for this, much relating to co-operation in relation to children: 'want to do our best for the children'; 'get on for the kids' sake' or to better communication after the break-up: 'can talk about things'; 'still good friends' and 'we get on better living apart'. Most of the 15 comments from those who had said the relationship was only fair, centred on pleas for the non-resident parent to make more effort in relation to the children, in particular to spend more time with them. As the following focus group comments illustrate, lone mothers can have mixed feelings about the nature of the support forthcoming from the non-resident parent. In the case of the first mother quoted, her daughter stayed one night a week with her father. Asked if this helped her, she replied:

Yes, yes it does. It gives me time on my own and I can see my own friends. He's good to her, he is good to her now. He goes and buys her things. She'll ask for a toy or something from me and she'll say, 'Can I have something?' and you'll say, 'You can have it for a birthday present' and a week later he'll come over with it. But she'll need shoes or she'll need things for school – but he wouldn't think in that way to buy something like that.

In the second comment, difficulties also hinged on the ability of the other parent to lavish gifts and treats on the children, in contrast to the day to day hard work of being the with care parent:

My ex-husband does have the children sometimes and if there are changes then I have to pick up the pieces, you know. It's like I'm doing all the caring and the hard work and he will have them for the weekend

and will shower them with gifts which I can't do and I find that difficult to cope with.

Relationship with ex-partner 'unsatisfactory'

It is worth noting again here that 59 respondents of the 147 surveyed said that their children had no contact with their other parent. In the focus groups, single mothers spoke of being ignored by their children's fathers:

Participant: I didn't put the baby's father's name on the birth certificate. I don't want anything at all to do with him whatsoever. If he wants to get in touch with her, that's fair enough.

Interviewer: And has he – since she was born?

Participant: No, he knows – he has seen me in the town but he turned the head and walked on.

Another very young mother reported:

Well, I see the baby's father most days 'cause he lives in the town but he doesn't bother, like.

In the questionnaire, only those whose children still had contact with the ex-partner were specifically asked to comment on the nature of the relationship, and thirty two of these respondents had indicated that their relationship with their ex-partner was unsatisfactory. Most added explanatory comments, which ranged widely over blame, continuing conflict, communication difficulties, unreliability, unreasonable and abusive behaviour and lack of financial support, amongst other issues. Once again, the focus groups provided additional insight into the continuing unhappiness experienced by many lone parents and their children after family breakdown. This was particularly evident where domestic violence had been a factor in

sundering the relationship. A number of participants were survivors of domestic violence and one in particular was still living in fear of the erratic behaviour of her ex-partner:

Because I live on my own, when I hear a noise outside I actually think it's him coming and I have a molestation order outI received a letter last week from the police saying that because it has been so long since he has been in contact, I will probably have to get a new one. And until I get a new one he wouldn't be afraid to walk up and down the park or come near us because he is the type of person who might leave you alone for four or five months and then suddenly go on the drink one night and start, 'Oh I want my son, I want to see him'. And then he'll cause hassle and that. He's been to a solicitor and got letters (sent to me) saying that he wants to see him and then I heard nothing, he's just left it and never got back. Then in another five or six months, he'd say he wants to see him again.

In the above case, this young woman (who had sought counselling and carried a personal alarm) had found the PSNI quickly responsive to her calls for help and stated that they continued to monitor the situation. Another woman however felt let down by the police who, she felt, had been manipulated by her ex-husband, who continued to be emotionally abusive:

Participant: I remember a situation where he (ex-partner) was phoning me practically the whole day and it was practically a whole day of abuse, all day. And it got to the stage where I had had enough of this and I rang and he had an answering machine and I left three short messages. He then phoned the Police - and I would have got the Police out to him previous to this - and he went to the Police, and ... told them that I was abusing him with phone calls and everything. Anyway, they came round to give me a warning and I

just sat down and burst out crying and I explained that he had been phoning all day long and like it was mental abuse and he (the Policeman) said to me, 'Oh well, he hasn't said anything threatening and he hasn't said anything nasty' and he says, 'We're really just asking you not to phone him'. And you know my father says afterwards, 'What the hell are they coming round to you for? You know it should have been him they're after'

Interviewer: How did that leave you feeling?

Participant: Aw, just awful, I mean I was sitting apologizing to them for, you know, them having to come out in the first place. Now how pathetic was that? I should have been up in arms saying, 'Why don't you go and for God's sake sort him out?'. But you know, it's back and forth, back and forth and they can manipulate things so easily, you get to the stage where you do just get run down. You could keep it going and he would keep it going 'til you would have a nervous breakdown.

In the above case, the mother felt that this ongoing situation had badly affected her son's emotional well being. Other focus group participants reported the adverse effects on children of the father's intermittent contact, an issue which also emerged in the questionnaire survey, where respondents were asked to comment on the impact of living apart on their children's relationship with their other parent. Sixty seven lone parents responded to this question, with the majority (n39) stating that the relationship was better than before. For eight respondents, it was the same as before, two did not know and 18 said that the relationship between children and non-resident parent was worse than before the break-up of the family. Reasons for a deteriorating relationship appeared to centre on a perceived lack of interest by the non-resident parent in keeping in touch: 'he ignores the children';

'doesn't spend much time with them'; 'viewed as a visitor, not a parent'; and 'doesn't stick to times agreed (for meetings)'. The effects of family breakdown on children are further explored in the next section.

Children and family breakdown

In the final part of the survey questionnaire, respondents were asked to consider a number of questions relating to their perception of any changes in their child(ren)'s behaviour following family breakdown. They were asked to complete this section only if they had lived with their ex-partner as a family unit. One hundred and two respondents (70%) did so.

Six questions requested the lone parents to identify changes in children's behaviour since becoming a one parent family. A range of behavioural measures were used, with parents being asked whether their children had, since the family breakdown:

- become more outgoing and confident, less outgoing and confident or had not changed
- become more calm/relaxed, more stressed or had not changed
- become less aggressive towards others, more aggressive or had not changed
- had taken on more responsibility around the house, less responsibility or had not changed
- been more settled at school, less settled or had not changed
- done better in their schoolwork, done less well or no change.

(Some questions were omitted for obvious reasons by parents of pre-school children).

On a number of the measures, a majority of respondents felt that there had been no change in their child(ren)'s behaviour or that behaviour had improved. For instance:

- 39% reported no change in terms of confidence, while 36% said that their

children had become more confident and outgoing

- 35% said that there had been no change in children's stress levels and 36% said that the children had become more calm and relaxed
- 54% said that there had been no change in their children's aggression levels towards others and 25% said that the children had become less aggressive
- 60% said that no change had occurred as regards taking on responsibility at home, while 35% said that the children had taken on more responsibility
- 54% reported no change at school and 29% said that their children were more settled at school
- 69% reported no change in their children's schoolwork, while 25% said that they had done better in schoolwork.

Although 55% of all survey respondents (see section above) had reported concerns about children's behaviour as a stressor, it is likely that this finding relates largely to parents' concerns about a normal range of childhood behaviour, rather than more severe childhood problems. The problems of dealing with the range of normal childhood behaviour may be magnified by coping alone. But it is clear that many of the respondents featured in this section (the majority who had previously been part of a two parent family) are detecting no discernible serious effects on their children (at least on these measures) following family breakdown. This may relate to the finding, cited above, that many of these parents believed that their children's relationship with the absent parent was now better than before the family breakdown. They attributed this to factors such as: 'he appreciates the children more'; 'child gets more attention'; 'sees the children more now'; 'no more fighting'; and 'I find it easier living apart and my child picks this up'. These comments, alongside focus group evidence, suggest that if parents can put their own conflicts to one side, outcomes

may be better for the children, as this questionnaire comment conveys:

My kids see me as a happy mum and their dad as a happy dad. This is because we don't live together and don't argue. The children are very happy seeing their dad and going with him two days a week (questionnaire comment).

This situation is not however a simple matter, achieved without effort, as is illustrated by another questionnaire comment:

He had a gambling problem, had an affair, is secretive and lies. I find it difficult to manage my anger sometimes with him as he is very self focused. It has been hard work encouraging him to maintain a stable relationship with the children, but seeing the children now, it has been worth it (questionnaire comment).

It is important to note that a minority of those who had previously lived with a partner in a family group did report some adverse effects of family breakdown on children:

- A quarter (25%) of this group of respondents stated that their child(ren) had become less confident and outgoing
- 28% said that their children were now more stressed
- 22% reported higher levels of aggression
- 17% said that the child(ren) were less settled at school
- 7% said that they had done less well in their schoolwork.

Although numbers here are small and the questions probe a limited range of measures eliciting parents' perception of their children's behaviour at one point in time, it must nevertheless be a matter of concern that some children in the families surveyed are exhibiting signs of distress. In the lone fathers' focus group, two fathers were sharing custody with their ex-wives but in practice, caring for the children most of the time. They

reported that their children were disturbed by the erratic behaviour of their mothers, who had problems with alcoholism.



Lone mothers may worry about the absence of a father figure in their children's lives. This mother wrote in the questionnaire of her concerns regarding her son's insecurity:

I sometimes worry about the fact that my child is an only child and one of the few in his circle of friends without a constant father present in his life. He sometimes doesn't seem as confident as others and has questioned me about what would happen to home if I ever got married i.e would he be coming with me too? This makes me question his feeling of security (questionnaire comment).

It is these children and their parents, who have additional difficulties, who are likely to be in most need of help and support from statutory and voluntary agencies.

A notable theme that became apparent from questionnaire written comments and the focus groups was lone parents' yearning to be the best parents they possibly could be. This could be expressed as a fierce determination to ensure that children should not be stigmatised and disadvantaged by their family status:

I feel that society in general views lone parents like a type of illness and it saddens me greatly. I wish people would just treat us like anyone else, because it's the children that suffer (in school etc).... My child will have a good and full life – because I will ensure she does. She will have all the chances in life that kids with both parents have (questionnaire comment).

In one focus group, part of the discussion highlighted participants' worries about not conforming to the image of a normative 'happy family':

Participant 1: I find one of the main things that worries me is that other families are all happy because they are together and it's great, it's brilliant. And it's probably not like that but that's just the way you feel after separation or divorce. You look at everybody else and think, 'Why can't we be like that?' You feel on your own.

Participant 2: Yes, like, 'Why couldn't I have got a good one?' You see these good men and their wives are real bad to them and you think, 'Why couldn't I have got a good one – I was more than good to him and he was just real bad!' (laughter)

Participant 1: Yes, when you look at other families, you think they're happy and it makes you feel very alone.

Interviewer: So you are imagining that other people are 'happy families'?

Participant 1: Yes I do. I keep thinking that they are.

Despite such concerns, there was much evidence here to confirm the findings of a recent research report in Northern Ireland (Bunting et al 2003) that lone parents can justifiably take pride in their parenting achievements, despite the difficulties:

I don't dislike being a lone parent. I feel me and my kids are more happy and confident people. They have both done great at school and I am very proud of them. There is help out there, though limited, we just need to find it! (questionnaire comment).

I believe that being a lone parent isn't frowned upon as much due to the rising number of lone parent families. I take pride in being a lone parent because I know I can instil the best values in my son. It does get hard and tiresome, but staying with my husband would not have done my son or myself any favours (questionnaire comment).

Summary

In this section, issues relating to children and family breakdown have been explored. The research shows that a majority of the children are still in reasonably frequent contact with their non-resident parent and that many of the lone parents have negotiated a good or fair relationship with their ex-partner. For a minority of parents, however, the relationship with the ex-partner is far from good and some children have been adversely affected, on a number of measures, by family breakdown. Yet despite the difficulties of parenting alone, many lone parents in the WHSSB area can and do take pride in their achievements.

8. LONE FATHERS



This section reports on the focus group which was held specifically for lone fathers. Although less than one in ten lone parents in Northern Ireland are male, it had nevertheless been found that this group of lone parents had been under-represented in the survey and focus group stages of the research project and it was to redress this imbalance, at least partially, that a separate focus group was convened at a late stage of the research. It was attended by four lone fathers, who had between them ten children, aged six years to fifteen years, in their care. Two fathers were widowers and two had joint custody with their children's mothers, but reported that in practice, they were parenting alone for most of the time.

The difficulties of recruiting lone fathers to the research have been discussed in the introduction and were a theme in the focus group discussion. One man, who had been personally contacted, said:

I'm not sure that if I'd got a letter about a focus group on single parenting, I'd not have thought of other things I had to do.

A consensus emerged that lone fathers in the WHSSB area were difficult to contact because they were not as likely as lone mothers to have links with a community or voluntary group and this is a significant finding, which is

further discussed below. A consequence of this is that the number of men attending the focus group was small and a question naturally arises regarding the degree to which these participants' experiences are representative of other lone fathers' experiences. This was an issue spontaneously raised by the fathers themselves. While having few contacts with organized groups, each man stated that he personally knew a number of other lone fathers and all asserted that their own accounts of lone fatherhood were not untypical and could represent the lives of many other lone fathers not present. Whether this is the case or not, key questions for the discussion were:

- To what extent is there a gender differential in parenting alone or are the issues facing female and male lone parents broadly similar?
- Do lone fathers have any specific needs, particularly in relation to services?

On the first point, it quickly became clear that in many respects, both male and female lone parents face similar problems, in relation to income levels, employment and childcare issues and the stresses of parenting alone. This father's comment about the difficulties of combining paid work with housework and childcare could have been echoed by many of the lone mother respondents:

(Lone parents) can't really work. They can but they can't really when they have wains..... But if the wain's sick you have to take time off or go and lift them, unless you have good friends who would do it for you. All my family works so that's why I stay in the house with the wains. I could get a job, no problem anywhere, well, easy enough. And when I am working – if I was working all week, I'd be coming to the house crabbit. In at five o'clock and make the dinner. By the time you're sitting down, it's eight o'clock and you've been awake from eight o'clock in the morning.

Two lone fathers were not in paid employment; one worked on an intermittent basis, while the fourth was self-employed and carried responsibilities for his employees as well as the three children living with him. His comment also mirrors the ambivalence felt by some lone mothers about combining work and parenting.

I work for myself so I am blessed in that respect, as I have an income. What I do is, I go out at five in the morning and I come back in at half seven and get them up for school, get them to school and then go back to work for half nine.

Interviewer: Have you always been able to do that or is that just recently since they have got older?

Probably, but I have to say I was blessed with a housekeeper and sisters-in-law and parents and family support played a big part. But if I had a choice I would rather be in the house, to tell you the truth, but I've got a bunch of people that work for me so I have to go in there for their wages as well as for the children.

In common with the lone mother respondents, these fathers expressed a great determination to do their very best for their children. One father, who was struggling with many difficulties in his life, declared:

Well, I feel a big thing in the child's mind is protection – the feeling of security. And men – whether it's the voice or their smell or presence or whatever (can give them that)....I want them to shine in their own wee way, whatever way it is. And I believe I want that as much as a woman.

There was also an awareness of the value of time spent in parenting that was perhaps denied to other men:

Participant 1: Well, it's a privilege, isn't it, really. When there is so much discrimination and you have people needing to dress up as super heroes to get access to their kids and you've got your children 90% of the time or 100% of the time. It is a privilege when you're able to do a lot of things with the kids that other fathers miss out on in parenting. So that's a good thing.

Participant 2: It makes you a better parent. I'm a better parent now that what I was 8 years ago.

On the other hand, some aspects of parenting were identified as being more difficult for a lone father. The men discussed their uncertainties around sex education for their daughters. Shopping for clothes was also something of a conundrum, as this interchange illustrates:

Participant 1: I'm up the town today and I have to get their (the children's) clothes for Christmas and I don't really like to do it, you know what I mean. It's definitely a woman's role. I don't like doing it.

Participant 2: You have to try to get into it.

Participant 1: I used to go to the shops with the women and walked round in circles after them – I would have gone to the chip shop and just sat outside – let them get on with it.

Participant 3: What you need to do is let the wain be your guide round the shop.

Participant 2: I agree with you.

Participant 3: My wee girl knows what she wants....I have found a trendy clothes shop in town and I handed my daughter over to a young trendy shop assistant who wasn't much older than her. I'm just totally un-cool, you know.

One man admitted to problems with what he called 'doing the compassion stuff. You know, doing the mummy stuff as well as the daddy, hunter/gatherer stuff' but at the same time, everyone in the group was keen to emphasize that nurturing is not solely a maternal attribute. Here this was expressed as a challenge to gender stereotyping:

There has always been this cultural monolith that 'men are good at this and women are good at that' and it's taught through education, books, movies, everything. But it is a myth. The only thing is that we need somebody with a big loud hailer to say that it's just a myth. And it also has to be shouted at the courts and the services. It's a myth, this isn't just always true that all men are 'this' and all women are 'that'. We have to blow it apart.

In what way do issues for lone fathers and lone mothers differ?

Underlying their awareness of gender stereotyping, the lone fathers in the group expressed a sometimes explosive mix of resentment and frustration in relation to what they perceived as unfair treatment of lone fathers by the authorities and society in general. This included difficulties with getting a school to recognize the father as the parent with care and annoyance that the local Jobs and Benefits Office appeared to one man to offer only jobs and courses that were geared to lone mothers rather than lone fathers.

Major problems with statutory agencies and the courts were passionately expressed. One widowed father with three children in his care, was troubled by lack of access to his young child by a subsequent relationship. He felt that 'the law is unfairly weighted against men'. Two participants had been granted joint residency, but stated that the children lived with them nearly all the time, because of their ex-partners' alcoholism. They felt that on the occasions when the children stayed with their

mothers, they returned in an unsettled state and that the mothers' instability was disturbing the children (and the father):

But the biggest problem for my health, for the children's health, goes back to this sexism that comes from the court. They say, yes, shared custody and you can look after them and then when she makes a recovery, then you are expected to just drop everything and that disrupts the children's routine. You think, yes, of course, if she's well for a period, then of course, she's their mother.

Interviewer: Are the children's views taken into account? Do you feel the children have a say in what happens?

Well, the children are kind of torn, she is their mother. At times when she is on a drinking binge the eldest will say, 'I don't want to go back there, I want to stay full time here' (with the father) but when she is in recovery, of course they want to see their mother well and then they get hopes built up.

Another aspect of the shared custody court order was that the fathers reported difficulties and confusion in claiming state benefits, such as Child Benefit and tax credits and they felt that this was causing the family hardship. In two cases, these problems had been continuing for some years.

Lone fathers and services

Given the often serious worries and anxieties that these lone fathers described, it is perhaps surprising that they appeared to have little contact with statutory or voluntary services. Their level of support from their families varied considerably, so the overall impression was of a degree of isolation. One man viewed this as a function of male pride and independence:

Well, you know what happens – traditionally men don't go to doctors about their health and we don't look for help. You are up

against the male ego there, we don't like to ask for help.

However, there was also a kind of resignation in relation to the perceived absence of services for lone fathers. When participants were asked at the beginning of the focus group if they understood its purpose, one man immediately replied:

Because there is no help of any kind for lone parents who are men.

Later discussion revealed that this man had thought that Gingerbread was an organisation solely for women. It is possible that isolated lone fathers may over-estimate the range of services available to women or not understand that some services are available to both men and women:

The heartbreak of being on your own through separation or divorce is bad enough, but I know my female friends have a range of about 12 different facilities to help with the pain. But I have to be honest with you, the guys don't.

This participant had been a member of a men's group but found that the issues discussed there were not of immediate relevance to him as a parent with care. Rightly or wrongly, participants felt that as lone fathers, obstacles were being put in their path:

The guys have got enough pain in their hearts, they're obviously got wounds in their hearts about their wives and the daily struggle ...but then to have another major difficulty with every agency offering resistance. ...You have a range of agencies being negative and making it tougher.

Only one lone father had sought help from Gingerbread to untangle what appeared to be a fraught relationship with social security officials. He said that he had attempted to

apply for a loan from the Social Fund but had been refused on the grounds that his wife had already applied. He felt that he had been accused of 'working a scam' but reported that the Gingerbread worker's intervention had resolved the matter in his favour.

Summary

Although it could be argued that four focus group participants cannot be representative of all lone fathers in the WHSSB area, they at least give an indication of the needs of this particular group. In many respects, they shared the same pre-occupations as lone mother respondents, in terms of income, employment, childcare and the satisfaction and stresses of parenting alone. But there were also important differences. It is worth noting that this focus group took up more time than any of the other five and this was clearly because, as the participants stated, they had been given an opportunity to come together and give vent to long pent-up feelings about their situation as lone fathers. Even more so than the women respondents, these lone fathers were making a plea for services and support for all lone parents:

A woman should be supported on her own with children. If she's on her own with children, then she should be supported. This is important for all of us, we should support women on their own with children - but we should provide the same support for guys.

The consensus opinion of the lone fathers' focus group was that in addition to help with negotiating with state and other agencies, lone fathers needed and would use a self-help support group, which would be, in the words of one lone father, 'a receptacle to take all this passion and fear and hurt and resistance'.

9. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sections 2 to 8 have presented the results of survey and focus group research amongst 151 lone parents in the WHSSB area of Northern Ireland. This final section will discuss the findings of the research in relation to UK government policy as it affects lone parents. Policy and findings are further considered in the context of Northern Ireland and the Western Board area. The report concludes with both an analysis of the implications of the research evidence for policy direction and delivery of services to one parent families in the Board area and with recommendations for action.

It will be no surprise that many of the findings of this research match those of previous research in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is well established that many lone parents and their children are likely to experience poor socio-economic circumstances: low levels of income, unemployment and dependence on state benefits and social housing (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Ford, Marsh and McKay, 1995; Evason et al, 1998; Marsh and Vegeris, 2004). They are also subject to worse health than couples with children (Popay and Jones, 1991; Reeves et al, 1994; Benzeval, 1998; Shouls et al, 1999). In the present research, two thirds of respondents were living on incomes of less than £150 a week, three quarters were in debt, 97% were in receipt of some form of state benefit apart from Child Benefit, 70% were not in paid employment and over three quarters lived in rented accommodation. Respondents also reported a range of physical and emotional ill health, particularly depression and anxiety. The associations between poverty, unemployment and ill health are well understood and it must be a matter of concern that a high proportion of lone parents and their children in the WHSSB area are suffering multiple levels of deprivation.

A context for these findings is that the Western Board area is characterised by a number of measures of socio-economic deprivation. Rates of full-time employment in the area are lower than the Northern Ireland average and there is higher unemployment and long term unemployment. It has a higher percentage of people in the lower socio-economic classification and more with no educational qualifications, compared to Northern Ireland as a whole. Housing conditions are worse in parts of the WHSSB area than in any other area. The West has the highest proportion of people with a potential psychiatric disorder and more people who suffer a severe lack of social support (WHSSB, 2004).

Lone parents and government policy

By the early 1990s, lone parent families had become 22% of families with dependent children. Around seventy per cent of lone mothers were dependant on Income Support and the growing social security cost became a major concern of the Conservative government of the time. Many lone parents felt stigmatised by the emphasis on the traditional family and what were perceived as unfavourable comments about lone parents by government ministers. The Conservatives set up the Child Support Agency through the Child Support Act 1991 in order to make absent parents responsible for paying maintenance for their children, with the aim of lessening the burden on the state. When Labour came to power in 1997, they were also focused on reducing state expenditure, but within the context of an anti-poverty strategy, a key tenet of which was 'welfare to work'.

In relation to lone parents, the welfare to work strategy encompasses the New Deal for Lone Parents, which is voluntary, but obliges the lone parent to attend an interview when the youngest child reaches school age; and the introduction of enhanced in-work benefits, including a childcare credit. In a wider context,

the Green Paper 'Supporting Families' (1998) acknowledged the diversity of family forms and promised support for all families. A number of national initiatives to support families and parenting were put in place, including the National Family and Parenting Institute and the parents' Helpline. The National Childcare Strategy was launched in 1998 with a commitment to affordable, accessible and quality childcare at neighbourhood level, to be implemented through Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships, and free nursery school places were made available to all four year olds.

In his pre-Budget Report in November, 2004, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown announced a raft of measures to enhance existing provision for children and families. In addition to extending paid maternity entitlement from six to nine months, a commitment was made to extending it to 12 months by the end of the next Parliament. The childcare element of Working Tax Credit will increase in April 2005 from a maximum of £135 to £175 for one child (and to a maximum of £300 a week for bigger families), while the proportion of childcare costs that parents can claim will rise from 70% to 80% from April 2006. The government promises to provide all three and four year olds with twelve and a half hours a week of free early education and childcare from 2006, while weekday, 'wraparound' (paid) childcare is to be provided by schools. For lone parents, a £40 a week bonus in their first year of returning to work was announced and the national minimum income guarantee for a lone parent and one child will rise to £199 a week.

Research

The impact of the government's initiatives to encourage lone parents into work as a route out of poverty has been analysed from a variety of perspectives by academics and researchers. Concerns have been expressed about the quality of employment on offer and

about lone parents' skills and qualifications and their longer-term pay and prospects (Dean, 2001; Gray, 2001; Rake, 2001). Some commentators have reservations about a policy which may devalue unpaid caring work and reinforce traditional employment patterns for women. (Pascall, 1999; Kidger, 2004). Many lone parents see their primary role as that of a parent rather than a worker; and the ill health and disability of parents or children or other caring responsibilities can be a barrier or disincentive to work (Gray, 2001; Evason et al, 1998; Bunting et al, 2003).

On the other hand, two recent research studies have been more positive about the direction of government policy. Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) research on children and families by Vegeris and Perry (2003) highlighted the fact that families living below the poverty threshold are twice as likely as other families to report not being in good health and a third more likely to report disability or long term illness. However, both couple and lone parent families entering work showed clear signs of improved health. Differences on a range of child characteristics (health, educational achievement, contact with the police) were more closely related to family work status and income than to being in either a one or two parent family. The second DWP study, Marsh and Vegeris (2004), is a nationally representative, cohort study of lone parents over ten years, from 1991 to 2001. It shows an improvement in the circumstances of most lone parents over this period. In some cases, this is due to an exit from lone parenthood, because the children have grown up or because of successful re-partnering. But it is entry to work that the authors identify as the factor most strongly associated with recovery from higher levels of hardship in 1991. In their sample population, the proportion of lone parents in work of 16 hours or more rose from 27% in 1991 to 56% in 2001 and three quarters of those in work in 1991 were still in work in 1996 and 2001. No

negative outcomes were ascribed to the children of working lone parents. Nor did teenage mothers, on whom the moral panic of the early 1990s was particularly focused, necessarily remain in long-term dependence on the state. Those most disadvantaged in 1991, the young, single, never-partnered lone parents, were no less likely than other lone parents to have improved their circumstances. The authors conclude unequivocally that 'this study strongly supports a policy that work is the best form of welfare for lone parent families and their children, when work is possible' (ibid, 2004).

Lone parents in Northern Ireland

To what extent can the findings of the two DWP reports be related to the circumstances of lone parent families in the western part of Northern Ireland? This question must be considered in relation to socio-economic factors in Northern Ireland as a region and in the Western Board area in particular. While Northern Ireland no longer has the worst unemployment rate of all the UK regions, it still has high levels of long-term unemployment in certain geographical areas, a low wage economy and average household income that is 22% lower than the UK average (in conjunction with higher fuel and energy costs). As outlined above, all these factors are exacerbated in the Western Board area. It is estimated that child poverty affects some 38% of families in Northern Ireland with dependent children (McLaughlin and Dignam, 2002; Hillyard et al, 2003). In the Western Board area, one in three wards in Derry city has a child poverty rate above 70% and three city wards, Shantallow East, Brandywell and Creggan South, have the highest rates of child poverty in Northern Ireland (Horgan, 2005).

In Northern Ireland, because of low wages for manual workers and the nature of the labour market, being in work is no guarantee of family prosperity. McLaughlin and Dignam (2002) state that half of all children living below the

poverty line are in families where at least one adult is in employment. Research amongst young people growing up in one parent families in Northern Ireland showed that although half the parents were in work, money was still a problem for these families (Bunting et al, 2003), as it was in the present WHSSB research:

The kids are well looked after and I try to balance work and time for them. I am an independent person and feel guilty for taking benefits, but with the children growing up, they become more demanding. I try to teach them the value of money and make them understand that I haven't got a tree bearing money out the back (questionnaire comment).

Less than one in three respondents was in full-time, part-time or self employment. Nearly all were claiming Working Tax Credit (WTC), which is an in-work benefit awarded to those working at least 16 hours a week and below a certain level of earnings. The findings indicated that for some respondents, this benefit, with its credit to help with childcare costs, was making the difference between working and not working, as without it, they would not have been able to manage on a low wage. One lone parent remarked that it made her feel she was being treated on an equal footing with other families. Nonetheless, whether in paid employment or not, money worries were a source of stress for nearly nine out of ten respondents.

Income

The findings indicate that two thirds of the sample population were living on very low incomes of less than £150 a week and dependant on state benefits, chiefly Income Support. At this level of income, even with Housing Benefit, it would be very difficult to manage to meet the costs of food, fuel, clothing and even a modest social life or a holiday for the family. In other words, a majority of respondents have a standard of

living well below what most people in Northern Ireland regard as acceptable (see Hillyard et al, 2003). On this level of income, borrowing from a variety of sources seems inevitable and indeed, 75% of respondents were indebted to family, friends and a variety of creditors, including, most worryingly, doorstep lenders, to whom they would have been paying a high rate of interest.

Reasons for not working

Low income levels, coupled with government initiatives targeted at lone parents, may suggest an incentive to seek employment. Yet a majority of the non-employed lone parents said they were not looking for work at the moment. Why was this? The most important reason, given by 63% of this group of respondents, and by lone parents in previous research (Spence, 1996; Evason et al, 1998) was that they were looking after the home and family. This highlights a problem within current government policy: the tension between promoting work as the route out of poverty and Labour's emphasis on good parenting as a social good. Many lone parents would feel that they cannot adequately combine the roles of parent and worker, especially when their children are very young, as are many of the children of non-working WHSSB respondents, 77% of whom had at least one child under the age of five. Nationally, figures show a wide gap in working patterns between lone mothers and couple mothers of pre-school age children, though the employment gap narrows considerably once children are aged 16-18 (ONS, 2004).

The decision by a lone parent to juggle work and parenting may involve a complex balancing of factors. Other reasons which emerged from the survey and from the focus groups may be local to the Western Board area, much of which is rural. There was for instance a strong perception of a dearth of suitable jobs in the area, a fear of coming off benefits and being no better off, and difficulties with transport

(only a third of respondents had a car). Also significant were education and training, childcare and health issues, each of which will now be discussed in more detail.

Education and training

Education and training provides an important pathway to better paid employment. Amongst the non-employed majority of respondents, one quarter was not seeking work because they lacked the qualifications and skills to do so. However, nearly a third were taking steps to improve their prospects by studying or training. In some cases, the immediate aim was self development, confidence building or the social aspect of group learning. Other respondents were firmly focused on enhanced job opportunities, possibly when their children were older. However, it is important to note that lone parents face many barriers in returning either to work or to education and training, not least the financial barrier. This was a theme that was reiterated again and again in the written questionnaire comments, with parents evidently worried about loss of benefit and managing on a student loan if they returned to full time education or confused and discouraged about the availability of childcare help:

I had planned to go back and do a B Tech in September for 3 days a week and a placement the other day. I was told that I would not receive any financial help childminding wise if I did not work 16 hours per week. The course is very tough, with a lot of assignments and I could be under too much pressure looking after a child, managing a job and going back to school. I found this to be very unsatisfactory and now am not going back to school (questionnaire comment).

Childcare

Survey respondents and focus group participants all emphasised the importance of high quality, accessible and affordable childcare, whether as an absolute essential to

enable lone parents to work, or to afford them time for study/training, or simply to get a break from parenting. As we have seen, government has made a strong commitment to providing childcare at neighbourhood level. Unfortunately, this research demonstrates that while some respondents were benefiting from the childcare components of WTC and some from the crèche facilities offered by Gingerbread, Surestart and other local groups, many lone parents in the WHSSB area are forced to be over-reliant on the good will of relatives and friends to provide this service. Partly this is again due to transport problems and the difficulties of finding evening babysitters in a rural area, but it may also relate to benefit regulations. In order to claim childcare costs under WTC, childminders must be registered. In some cases the difficulty related to a lack of registered childminders or other registered childcare provision:

I am entitled to help with childcare costs through Working Tax Credits. However, I could not find a registered childminder with vacancies so therefore I have to use an unregistered minder, so now I can't claim for the cost of childcare (questionnaire comment).

For non-working parents, even a modest charge for childcare can be too much for their budget, as this parent explains:

Now coming into summer I will find it hard to get childcare. Any summer schemes that are running are too costly for me. It would be nice if the government could pay for schemes or put some money to this, so it wouldn't be so hard on my pocket or other parents like me (questionnaire comment).

Health issues

A recent report on health inequalities in Northern Ireland (McWhirter, 2004) found that high levels of stress and worry were related to gender, age, family and employment status: that is, they were more likely to be associated

with being female, being young or middle aged with dependent children and being unemployed. These factors apply to a majority of WHSSB respondents and indeed 99% of the sample population reported some form of stress or worry in their lives. The major stressor was money worries but a majority was also troubled by not getting a break from parenting, by loneliness and isolation and by worries about their children's behaviour. Amongst other worries were children's health and respondents' own health, housing, conflict with an ex-partner and inability to find employment. A large minority (45%) reported feeling bothered by other people's attitudes to them, though there was some evidence that lone parenthood now carries less stigma than in even the recent past (Spence, 1996).

In light of these findings, it is hardly surprising that these lone parents also reported what appeared to be high levels of physical and emotional ill health in relation to their age (most are in their twenties and thirties). A wide range of physical ills was indicated but most striking is that a majority (57%) of survey respondents stated that they were suffering or had suffered depression, while a number of focus group participants vividly described their experiences of emotional distress. Nearly one in five respondents stated that they were in receipt of a disability benefit.

Children

Issues relating to children were addressed by asking respondents about any worries they had about their children's health and further explored in a section devoted to the effects of family breakdown on children. A number of parents described specific ailments which gave rise to worries about their children, while others were clearly troubled by the difficulty, due to low incomes, of providing a nutritious diet for the family. In the aftermath of family breakdown, it appeared that many of the lone parents were making an effort (sometimes at an emotional cost to themselves) to maintain

contact, for the sake of their children, with their ex-partner. Nearly 60% of respondents reported that their children were still in contact with their other parent. Of these children, more than two thirds saw their other parent at least once a week. A majority of the lone parents who were still in touch with their ex-partner said that the relationship was now either good or fair. These are positive findings, but there must be concern about the minority of respondents who reported adverse effects of family breakdown on their children. For instance, between 22% and 28% said that their children had become less confident, more stressed and more aggressive since becoming part of a one parent family, with smaller minorities of children becoming less settled at school or doing less well in schoolwork.



Policy implications

The findings of this research indicate that much more needs to be done to help and support lone parent families in the WHSSB area. Strategies for delivery of such support will be considered at national, regional and local level.

Turning first to government policies which have an impact on lone parents and their children, the government's own figures and independent research suggest that recent Labour policies

and initiatives, in particular the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), the Working Tax Credit with its more generous credits for childcare, the Child Tax Credit and the National Childcare Strategy are, in Britain, helping lone parents into work, raising the standard of living for some and contributing to a lessening of child poverty overall (Bradshaw, 2002; Marsh and Vegeris, 2004). However, doubts have been raised as to whether the welfare to work strategy will have the same effect in Northern Ireland, particularly in the west of the region, given different structural, economic and social factors (Horgan, 2005). Certainly, many non-employed lone parents in this research expressed a sense of hopelessness about finding employment in their area. Unlike English research on NDLP, which emphasised the importance of NDLP advisers in supporting lone parents in their search for work (Millar, 2000), some respondents did not speak very positively about their experiences of local adviser support.⁶ Fears about the difficulties of finding employment would seem to be given support by a postal survey carried out in August 2004 by the New Deal Branch at the Department for Education and Learning amongst 160 current or past participants in NDLP training courses. The survey found that while the vast majority expressed very positive views about their training and 69% gained a qualification, only 12% found work after completing training (DELNI, 2004).

Respondents in general had very mixed comments to make about government attitudes to lone parents. Working lone parents appreciated help in the form of in-work benefits but a sizeable minority of all respondents (45%) felt that government attitudes to them as lone parents were unfavourable – though this is a sharp fall in the proportion saying this in previous Northern Ireland research, in the last year of the Conservative government (Spence, 1996), when 78% thought that government viewed them unfavourably. A focus group in one

⁶ NDLP runs in a different way in Northern Ireland, with provision being divided between the Social Security Agency and the Department for Employment and Learning.

district council area in particular revealed high levels of dissatisfaction with government agencies and statutory services in general, ranging from complaints about social security to housing and GP services. In another focus group, a lone mother expressed a high level of stress and frustration in negotiating the agency transition from income support (social security) to Child Tax Credit (now administered by the Inland Revenue). Lone fathers in particular seemed to have problems in relation to claiming state benefits.

As outlined above, government has announced a number of proposed enhancements to maternity and paternity entitlements, to in-work benefits and to childcare provision, all of which will undoubtedly benefit employed lone parents and give necessary encouragement to those contemplating a return to work. Other lone parents, for a number of reasons highlighted in this research, may wish to stay at home and prioritise their parenting role. If they are not to be pressured against their own wishes to do otherwise, they must be supported in this choice. This government has almost doubled the element of income support which supports children and this is very welcome; however, further increases to income support for non-working families, in respect of both parent and children, would act as a buffer to the levels of family hardship identified in this research. Making it possible for lone parents to study full-time whilst still claiming income support would also help them to invest in their future. Greater funding of advice services in local areas would assist lone parents and others to understand better their entitlement to benefits and services and to negotiate a path through government bureaucracy.

Policy in Northern Ireland

The low levels of income experienced by a majority of lone parents who took part in this research point to high levels of child poverty. A major study of poverty in Northern Ireland in 2003 challenged policy makers and society in

general to consider whether the political will and social consensus exist to harness the progressive equality framework of section 75, new TSN and human rights legislation to eradicate child poverty (Hillyard et al, 2003).

Following a review of New Targeting Social Need (TSN), it was proposed in 2004 that it would be re-named the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy, with the aim of improving income and living conditions of the most disadvantaged. It was announced that there will be a greater focus on new targets, including lone parents and families containing one or more disabled people, and an additional priority of dealing with financial exclusion. The report proposes a new group to promote social inclusion, led by OFMDFM, to develop a strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion among lone parents. Such proposals, if enacted, would greatly benefit lone parents in Northern Ireland, as would a renewed focus on capacity building. The report cites 'the relevance of a wide range of programmes such as health, education and employment and training to enhancing an individual's capacity to participate in economic and social life, which in turn acts as an "insulator" against poverty' (www.research.ofmdfmi.gov.uk). WHSSB respondents clearly have difficulties in accessing such programmes at present and would welcome sustainably funded education, training and job opportunities in their local areas. Gingerbread NI has welcomed the proposals to reform New TSN but called for resourcing, while NICVA, the organisation representing the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, has reservations about the proposals, pointing out that there will be no new funding strategy and, by and large, a lack of timescales by which progress will be measured (NICVA, May 2004). Furthermore, in relation to children's services and support, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has warned that the government's Draft Priorities and Budget

2005-08 could jeopardize future children's services and in particular, he said that the proposed ending of the Children's Fund could affect 'the innovative and creative projects ...(which) are directed to those children and young people in greatest need' (www.childpolicy.org.uk/news), including, children in one parent families.

Policy and funding implications at Board level

It is perhaps surprising, considering the lack of physical and mental well being discussed in this report, that lone parents in the Board area do not make more use of services. Two thirds of respondents said that they had consulted a GP and nearly half of these consultations were because of depression. Only a third mentioned seeing a health visitor and a quarter a counsellor. Less than one in eight reported contact with a social worker, a CPN or mediation services. Around one in five had made use of services offered by Gingerbread. In terms of satisfaction with public services, health visitors attained the highest rating amongst health professionals. Three quarters of those who had consulted a GP were satisfied, though there were some complaints about GPs' treatment of depression. Some respondents were not happy about being offered anti-depressants as their only treatment, yet amongst those who had been offered counselling, this could be seen as too short-term to be effective. A minority (14%) of respondents felt that health professionals had unfavourable attitudes to lone parents. They felt that they were not listened to, or were being patronised. This suggests that health and social care professionals need to offer support, particularly to young lone mothers, in a sensitive way which does not undermine their autonomy. The Board may also wish to address ways of offering more support to lone parents suffering stress, anxiety and depression.

Amongst those who had used other services, there were high levels of satisfaction (almost 100% in the case of Gingerbread). In the

questionnaire and in the focus groups, lone parents wrote and spoke enthusiastically about the help and support they had received from Gingerbread, from the Surestart programme and from other locally based groups. Services on offer included childcare, education and training, advice and counselling or simply the opportunity to meet other parents in the same situation. The provision of social support adds value to these services and seems crucial in mitigating the isolation and loneliness experienced by many lone parents. However, it must be emphasised that only a minority of those surveyed mentioned having access to this support. This may be because of a lack of information or confusion amongst the lone parent population about what is available to them but is also likely to be attributable to under-provision of services, particularly in rural areas, or to under-funding of existing services. Evidence from this research strongly suggests that lone parents would welcome and make use of self-help and support groups that are available within their own locality. Lone fathers, in particular, were requesting this and working lone parents identified a need for groups that meet outside working hours.

An expansion of support services to lone parents by the Board, Trusts and other providers would entail greater financial support, not only for organisations specifically for lone parents, such as Gingerbread, but also for childcare and for programmes of support for families and parenting in general. This and other research has shown that many lone parents manage very well to maintain a happy family life and to take justifiable pride in their parenting achievements. However, there are also lone parents who are struggling not just with difficult economic circumstances but with conflict with an ex-partner and the emotional and behavioural difficulties of their children and it is these families who may most need the support of statutory and voluntary services.

Programmes to address the needs of lone parents and their children can be located within the context of the Board's own strategic objectives. The WHSSB Health and Wellbeing Investment plan 2004/05 undertakes to continue to contribute to the future development of New TSN, whose action plans include outcomes relating to the promotion of good quality services in areas of greatest need, policies and programmes which aim to reduce inequalities and to identify those in greatest need and measure the extent to which inequalities are being reduced (WHSSB, 2004). In 2002, in explaining the need for its Draft Strategy for Children and Young People's Health and Health Services, the Western Health and Social Services Board pointed out that it has the highest proportion of children and young people of the four Boards in Northern Ireland, at 30% of the population. It also has some of the highest levels of deprivation and is aware of the consequences of this for young people. It acknowledges that what we offer young people in their formative years has a lifelong impact on their health and well being. The Board wishes to develop a children and young people's health service that reflects local needs in an integrated, co-ordinated and comprehensive way and advocates partnership working to advance this aim. The Draft Strategy document remarks that 'improvement of our information base is central' to this work (WHSSB 2002:87). It is to be hoped that the findings of this research, alongside the Board's own community consultation (to which Gingerbread NI contributed on behalf of lone parents), will lead to a greater understanding of the needs of one parent families in the WHSSB area and will provide an impetus for improvements in services and support for this section of the population.

Recommendations

1. Health professionals should be aware of the high levels of ill-health amongst lone parents, particularly in terms of stress, anxiety and depression; and of the need to be sensitive in their dealings with young lone parents in particular.
2. The provision of accessible, affordable, high quality childcare is crucial in enabling lone parents to return to work or study or simply to have a break from parenting.
3. There is a need for the further development of self-help and support groups which provide contact with other lone parents. This may particularly be required to combat the isolation of lone fathers.
4. In addition to general support for families and parenting, specialised advice and counselling services should be made available to one parent families.
5. More financial support should be channelled to popular, successful, locally based services which provide training, advice and childcare: for example, the Surestart programme and Gingerbread.
6. The tension in social policy between getting lone parents into work and government concern with standards of parenting must be resolved.
7. While there is evidence that policies aimed at encouraging lone parents into employment are having a positive effect on the living standards of some one parent families, issues relating to transition to work should continue to be addressed, for instance, in relation to the run-on of benefits. The Social Security Agency and the Department for Employment and Learning need to be aware that in some areas of Northern Ireland, there is a strong perception that transition to work is particularly problematic.
8. Where lone parents choose for a variety of reasons to delay re-entry to the labour market, their choice should be supported with an increase in income support levels.
9. Steps should be taken by government to clarify the entitlement of lone fathers with care to state benefits and to facilitate' uptake of these benefits.
10. It should be possible to be in receipt of income support while in full-time study. This would enable many more lone parents to enhance their future career prospects.

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Gingerbread Northern Ireland
169 University Street
BELFAST
BT7 1HR

T: 028 9023 1417 (General Enquiries)
T: 0808 808 8090 (Freephone Advice)
F: 028 9024 0740

E: enquiries@gingerbreadni.org
W: www.gingerbreadni.org

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