

summer 2004

choices

Your Choice, Your Future – Supporting Lone Parents

Team work

Lawrie's family supporters



Elaine and Kelly
'between us we get there'

Employers and Childcare
– holding the baby and the job

Inside: Food safety and barbecues – tips for a sizzling hot summer

Inside



In this, the third edition of Choices, writer and broadcaster ANNE HAILES has been hearing the many and varied stories of men and women who for some reason have had to adjust their lifestyles to become a lone parent. How do they balance daily life? Who they turn to for support? What help is available from New Deal?

“Again I have been impressed with the way in which these men and women approach the situation, always putting their children first. The other side of the coin is how the children seem to understand what their mum or dad is going through and, in their own way, take the pressure off by sharing the ups and downs of family life. The lone parents I talked to have sought and found help when it was needed. I hope through these pages many more will find the courage to contact Lone Parent Advisers and other support services and discover how this partnership can give them peace of mind, a sense of direction and additional money to ease the burden of bringing up a family as a single parent.”

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“Gingerbread was marvellous when I contacted them. They listened to my story, didn’t judge me and helped me to sort out my finances. I’m now able to see a future for my children and me. I feel I have my life back on the right track.”



GINGERBREAD is the lead agency working with and for one-parent families who make up one in four families in Northern Ireland. Gingerbread identifies lone parents as those who are widowed, single, separated or divorced. Over 10% of today’s lone parents are male and increasingly Gingerbread has found men coming for help and support in looking after their families.

According to Gingerbread’s Director, Marie Cavanagh, the stigma attached to separation, divorce and single parenting is diminishing. “Increasingly, the negative stereotyping of one parent families is being reduced, but we still have to address the issues of poverty, isolation and social and economic exclusion being experienced by many families.”

Gingerbread’s Advice Service offers lone parents FREE, confidential and impartial advice on a wide range of issues. Most enquires come through the Freephone Advice Helpline which is staffed by highly experienced workers and volunteers. Advisers can be reached at 0808 808 8090.

Being employed outside the home is high on many lone parents’ list of priorities. What is vital is employment which will pay sufficiently well to enable lone parents to get off benefits, out of the home and take care of childcare costs.

Gingerbread offers a range of training to enable this to happen.

These include:

- OCR – accredited courses in CLAIT, CLAIT+ and also ECDL.
- ‘On Course’ – the CIPD ‘Certificate in Training’ is aimed at those lone parents who are, or wish to become, trainers. In the past graduates have been promoted in their own workplaces whilst others have obtained employment as training officers in the voluntary and public sector.
- A training and work placement programme called “CHOICES”, allows lone parents to gain a recognised qualification in a subject of their choice and work experience to enhance their CV. The biggest advantage of “CHOICES” is that students can study in their own locality.

Accessible and affordable childcare provision is essential for lone parents.

Gingerbread campaigns for the development of family-friendly policies and improvements in childcare provision in NI. It is taken a lead by developing such policies within the organisation and offering on-site childcare for those participating on some training courses. Gingerbread also provides respite child care for lone parents to promote health and well-being.

Gingerbread promotes positive images of one-parent families and develops services, which break down the barriers they face. The organisation is uniquely placed to respond to government initiatives affecting one-parent families, highlight the issue of poverty and promote equality of opportunity for lone parents and their children.

With Gingerbread NI lone parents are not alone.



Gingerbread NI’s Awards Ceremony Nov. 03
L-R: Ruth McBride, George O’Doherty (Dept Employment & Learning), Patricia Magee & Anne Downs

**Freephone Advice
Helpline: 0808 808 8090**

Central Office

Belfast

T: 028 9023 1417

**Western Regional Centre
Derry**

T: 028 7137 7066

**Northern Regional Centre
Ballymena**

T: 028 2563 8086

E: enquiries@gingerbreadni.org

W: www.gingerbreadni.org

Lone Parent Advisers are always thinking up ways to get their important message across.

Elaine Whiteside and her colleagues organised a coffee morning and, as ANNE HAILES heard, it was well worthwhile.

When Kelly Thompson was only 19, she fell pregnant. For a while she and her boyfriend stayed together but it didn't work out and now Kelly is the proud parent of a delightful little daughter, living on their own and enjoying each other's company. Rea is Kelly's joy and at almost three years of age a fascinating handful!

Kelly was working full-time before Rea was born but she had to give up her secretarial job after the birth and for a while she simply couldn't consider going back into employment.

"I lived with my mum until the baby was two and then, quite suddenly, I knew I was ready to face life and work again so I began to look around."

With Income Support and Housing Benefit, Kelly was able to rent her own home, place her daughter in a crèche and go looking for a part time job. At the same time she got a letter from Elaine Whiteside, a Lone Parent Adviser in the Shankill Jobs and Benefits office, inviting her to the coffee morning and Advice Day being held in the Shankill Leisure Centre.

It was a visit that was to change her life.

The three of us were having a cup of coffee in Belfast and it became obvious that the friendship between Kelly and Elaine had grown since that day; indeed they now work together in the same office.

How come? Well, Elaine took up the story and explained.

"We organised an information day in the form of a Coffee Morning last March in the Shankill Leisure Centre. We wanted the event to be informal but informative as well. On the day I was just hoping someone would show and Kelly was one of the first to arrive! Over 40 people came

“ I lived with my mum until the baby was two and then, quite suddenly, I knew I was ready to face life and work again so I began to look around. ”



“ We organised an information day in the form of a coffee morning last March in the Shankill Leisure Centre. We wanted the event to be informal but informative as well. ”



"This was our first attempt at organising such an event. We were giving the public what they wanted, information on benefits, childminding, help and advice on returning to work and what other benefits are available to them. Others who agreed to give their time included EGSA (Educational Guidance Service for Adults), the Department for Employment and Learning, (better known to our customers as the Jobmarket), Northern Ireland Childminding Association and Citywide Action a local training provider. Our only disappointment was that more of the local training providers and advisory bodies who accepted our invitation did not show on the day. But maybe next time."

that day to hear about the New Deal for Lone Parents and I feel the day was a great success. The message we received was that they needed information and were appreciative of what was on offer and, as we provided supervised play areas for the children, the mothers and some fathers too had peace of mind. They were able to relax and meet advisers over a cup of coffee and ask the questions they needed answers to. I'll never forget the amount of time required to organise the day! Between September and March we searched out names and addresses of current lone parents who were claiming income support at our office, local organisations who could help, printing invitations, organising advertising, catering and, of course, securing a venue!"

Elaine is full of enthusiasm. She and her husband have three children and although she has worked with the Social Security Agency for 19 years, her job of almost four years advising lone parents has grown on her.

One of the most often-asked questions is whether or not it will be worthwhile to return to work. This depends on the personal circumstances of the lone parent and no two cases are alike. The fact that they could be financially better off is obviously important but it's a complex question to answer; this is where the expertise of the Lone Parent Adviser is so necessary.

Having Elaine and her colleagues on the spot at the leisure centre meant lone parents could make appointments to come into the office in Snugville Street for further and more personal advice and information. Barriers were broken down that day

and the lack of formality encouraged lone parents of all ages to follow up in the office situation.

As Elaine explains, young people, and indeed older people, who find they are single parents through divorce, separation or widowhood, often don't enjoy any sort of social life and lose confidence.

"We offer them a chance to build that self-esteem again and to investigate with us the chance of taking on a course of re-training or further education or finding suitable work."

This is what Kelly did.

I'd been looking for a part-time job and at the Advice Day Elaine suggested that I should watch out for positions opening within the Civil Service. It was in the local Job Centre a few weeks later that I saw a position advertised for an administrative assistant with the Social Security Agency. That same day Elaine had left a message on my telephone informing me about the same job! A complete coincidence! I applied for the post, sat an aptitude test and was offered a job in Shankill Jobs and Benefits office which I started last September. I'm very grateful to my Lone Parent Adviser because without Elaine there are many things I would have missed out on, especially claiming Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. Elaine advised me on these and helped me to fill in the forms.

New Deal for Lone Parents is available to lone parents on a specified benefit or who are not working or working less than 16 hours per week and are responsible for a child under 16 years of age.

The service provides help with looking for and applying for jobs or training and offers advice about childcare and in-work benefits.

With the introduction of Work Focused Interviews, lone parents must attend a compulsory interview as a condition of entitlement to benefit and through this they will be encouraged to participate in New Deal for Lone Parents.

One of the most often-asked questions is whether or not it will be worthwhile to return to work.

What the lone parent does after the interview is up to them; there is no pressure to take up a job or further education or to partake in the New Deal for Lone Parents programme. All lone parents, however, must attend the office on a regular basis for follow-up interviews. These are also compulsory.

Every day Elaine and her colleagues interview around 16 lone parents, offering advice and help. These include customers claiming benefits for the first time. Within the first three months of this year there have been approximately 40 new lone parents who have claimed benefits at Shankill Jobs and Benefits office. At these meetings lone parents are advised of the advantages of taking up employment or training. They are advised on how they can get help towards registered childcare costs, how mixing with other adults can help build their self confidence and broaden their social horizons, as well as being made aware of how to take the chance to increase their income which will make life a little easier as they bring up their children. With their Lone Parent Adviser they will find someone who is willing to sit and talk over problems even if they don't apply to employment and training matters.

Kelly is a great example of the success of the programme. She's got a good job and, having spent three days in her child's crèche to settle her in and to make sure it was suitable, she's content that Rea is having the best of care. She has her home and her family's invaluable help – and she's learning to drive.

"It seemed a long trek," she told me, "but I'm happy now. I've my own independence and a precious little daughter who is so intelligent and lively!"

For Elaine there's the satisfaction of making a difference.

"In the beginning I didn't think there would be enough to keep me occupied. How wrong I was! I like a challenge and building a rapport with the people coming to me for help, and in this job I get both."

There is also a huge variety of situations people present to her. The scenarios differ from case to case, from the lone parent wanting to return to college to the widowed parent having to get used to raising a family on their own and never having the comfort of their partner.

"I am also asked to help find employment to fit in with the lone parent's own needs and this, although time consuming, can be done with constant looking. It proves that tailor-made jobs are out there, it's just a matter of finding them."

All the jobs, training programmes and education opportunities at a Lone Parent Adviser's fingertips are accessed from many sources and fed into the screens on their computers. When something comes up they think will be of interest to a client, they post out the details or, if the closing date is imminent, they will telephone.

“ But we expect them to go looking themselves," Elaine insisted, "and certainly when something suitable turns up and the client doesn't follow it up we get very demoralised because it's really a partnership but in most cases I'm glad to say between us we get there.”

New Deal for Lone Parents

Participants in the New Deal for Lone Parents programme can access these opportunities, provided by the Department for Employment and Learning through JobCentres/Jobs and Benefits offices.

New Deal for Lone Parents is voluntary – participants retain existing benefit entitlements.

Job Broking

New Deal Personal Advisers provide support on Jobsearch, eg using JobCentreOnLine, completing application forms, CVs and preparing for interviews.

Careers Advice

Guidance and information is available to help adults make informed choices about career paths. This is available in any JobCentre/Jobs & Benefits office.

Disablement Advisory Service

Disablement Employment Advisers provide advice in JobCentres/ Jobs & Benefits offices.

Core Gateway Courses

If you need help applying for jobs, Core Gateway courses last up to 10 days. Lone parents can attend the full course or specific modules. Childcare costs and travel expenses may be payable.

Pre-Employment Training Courses

Update your skills with a course lasting up to 13 weeks, leading to a qualification. Courses are focused on vocational skills. Childcare costs and travel expenses may be payable, as well as a Training Premium to lone parents on benefits.

NVQ Courses

Level 2 or 3 last up to a year at local Colleges. They cover a wide range of occupations. Childcare costs and travel expenses may be payable, as well as a Training Premium to lone parents on benefits.

Self-Employment

There is help for lone parents interested in starting their own business, with start-up awareness training followed by test-trading (trying out a business idea). Ongoing advice and support is also available. Childcare costs and travel expenses may be payable, as well as a Training Premium to lone parents on benefits.

It is important to note that approval for expenses must be obtained from the New Deal Personal Adviser before starting any of these programmes.



For more information contact your local JobCentre/Jobs & Benefits office or New Deal Branch, Department for Employment and Learning, Adelaide House, 39-49 Adelaide Street, Belfast BT2 8FD, telephone 028 9025 7405.

Shirley Edgar is a courageous young woman.

ANNE HAILES described her as being petite and power-packed with a streak of determination to be envied!

On the edge of Killeel village is a cluster of new houses. They seem to snuggle up against 'Wee Binnian' in the Mourne Range. Shirley Edgar moved into her new home last February and she's proud of her achievement, a car, a job, a house and a son celebrating his ninth birthday with a party that afternoon.

I knew Shirley was a bit of a whizz-kid but I wasn't prepared for just how much she had achieved in the intervening two years since I last met her.

Shirley was born in the village in 1975, second of six children all growing up happily on their father's farm. When she was 13 years old she had renal failure and her first transplant. On New Year's Day 1990 she was told the

operation had failed, her body had rejected the new kidney.

It meant self-dialysis which she carried out at school and at home. Nine months later another kidney became available at the City Hospital and she jumped at the chance.

It seems that Shirley will tackle anything. "I'm indestructible!" she says. Certainly, with her 'new' kidney now 14 years old, she's looking well and full of energy and enthusiasm. Her motto is 'never add salt, always add sugar'!

Soon after I got to Shirley's, Maureen Trainor arrived.

Maureen has been Shirley's Lone Parent Adviser for over two years and has watched the young woman take the advice on offer and use it. She's obviously proud of her prodigy and her son.

When Shirley fell in love 10 years ago it looked like being a match made in heaven. Although they talked about a future, when she discovered she was pregnant it was a shock.



"I didn't know what to do but I did know it wouldn't be right to marry just because I was pregnant and by that time I knew it wouldn't have worked anyway so I decided to bring Andrew up myself. My parents weren't exactly pleased but they were all right with me staying on at home but I was very depressed, no work and I just sat at home."

That changed when she heard about a childcare course at the local Tech and it was the beginning of her journey to independence.

Shortly afterwards she met her Lone Parent Adviser, Maureen, who was able to go through all the pros and cons of the New Deal for Lone Parents and Shirley realised she could get a job and supplement her income with benefits. She worked in a local café until it closed and now she's working for Outlook, the local paper with its main office in Rathfriland. "But someday I'll have my own business and a staff working for me!" And you believe her.

Shirley is still on the New Deal scheme which is helping make up her wage so she can afford baby sitters and the extras needed for a growing boy. Now the two are living in their own home where there are few rules, just an understanding. "We're more like mates, it's a partnership," she explains. "We have respect for each other and we talk through our problems."

This is a determined woman, petite and power-packed.

"If someone told me I couldn't go to the North Pole with a bucket and spade, sucking an ice lolly and wearing sunshades – I'd do it just to show them! I think I'm indestructible, superhuman – until something goes wrong then I pull the reins in and cool off. When I'm having a down day I just say to myself, wise up, get on with it. I'm proud that I've worked for everything I've got," she adds. "In this world nothing is given to you."

She and Maureen sit side by side on the comfy sofa and it's obvious that there's a friendship between them which will last long past the New Deal connection.



"I'm so grateful to Maureen," she tells me. "Right from the word go she's been there with advice. Now living on Income Support is not an option anymore, I intend to keep working and moving on and I know Maureen is always there if I need to talk something over. The job in the newspaper is great and it means I can retain the Working Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit and keep saving."

"She's like a wee bird who found her wings and now has a nest to come home to," is how Maureen sums it up. "The most important thing to most lone parents is having a roof over their heads and independence and our aim is to help them achieve this. We have more and more lone parents coming in since the introduction of the Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit in April 2003 and many existing customers have come back to reassess their situation. A lot of things have changed," she adds. "Men know their rights these days and are beginning to fight for access and come to us for advice. Better rates too, and claims can be registered on computer now which cuts time and allows everyone to know how they stand without waiting. It's very fulfilling that, when a lone parent arrives in our office feeling isolated and confused, we can offer them something positive and a way forward to build their future."

Barbecue safely



Summer evenings are perfect for eating outdoors. Sadly, accidents with barbecues are all too common!

Follow these simple rules from ROSPA to barbecue safely...

- Supervising young children is essential.
- Make sure the barbecue is strong and sturdy.
- Prepare the barbecue early, so it's at the right temperature when you need to use it. This stops the dangerous temptation to put petrol or meths on it.
- Use long handled tools and thick oven gloves when handling implements like hot skewers.
- Make sure children or pets are not around when you set up, cook and put away the equipment.
- Be aware that barbecues become extremely hot and remain so even after cooking.
- Do not leave a barbecue unattended. An adult should always be supervising.
- Do not set up a barbecue near trees, fences, hedges or bushes.
- Keep matches and lighters away from children.
- Remember - drinking alcohol and cooking safely do not mix.
- Make sure the barbecue is completely extinguished before you leave it.

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Whatever you're cooking this summer, steer clear of food poisoning with some simple steps.

If you're barbecuing for lots of people, cook meat indoors and finish it off on the barbecue for added flavour. Remember, when you reheat food on the barbecue, make sure it's piping hot before serving.

- Wait until the charcoal is glowing red, with a powdery grey surface, before you start.
- Make sure frozen food is properly thawed before you cook.
- When barbecuing, the biggest risk is from raw and undercooked meat. Make sure you cook chicken, burgers, sausages and kebabs until piping hot all the way through, none of the meat is pink and juices run clear.
- Turn the food regularly, and move it around the barbecue, to cook it evenly.
- Check that the centre of the food is piping hot.
- Don't assume that if meat is charred on the outside it will be cooked properly on the inside.

Divorce is made more stressful by prolonged disagreement about parenting, conflict, poor communication ... Relate NI is concerned about the hurt and damage done to children by family conflict and as a result has developed programmes focusing on children and young people.

RelateTeen

RelateTeen makes a real difference in young people's lives by providing information, practical and emotional support to teenagers and helping them understand and express their feelings in a safe way. It teaches coping techniques to transfer to other areas of life and makes a positive difference at a time when parents may be unable to help because of their own distress.

Young people can contact RelateTeen themselves or be referred by a parent, teacher or other concerned adult – phone 028 9032 3454. Referrals should be made with the consent of the young person.

Court Related Family Mediation Project

Divorce is made more stressful by disagreement about parenting, conflict and poor communication. Mediation settlements in family disputes often last longer than court decisions and have better outcomes for children. Provided the parties concerned agree, magistrates make referrals to Relate NI. Separated parents in dispute over matters like contact and residence are helped to reach agreement in a series of confidential sessions with a qualified family mediator. Sessions are provided in Relate NI's neutral premises in Belfast and in Ballymena.

Mediation is not a counselling or a legal advice service. To find out more phone 028 9032 3454 or ask your solicitor.

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Sure Start for families

Tracey is 23. She has two children, Jack aged 3 and Kate aged 18 months and another on the way. She is a good parent and would do anything for her children. Tracey recently became a lone parent and is unemployed at present, with a total income of £144.05 per week. Money is tight and life can be quite stressful.

Tracey brings Jack and Kate to a crèche every week, while she attends a parents' group to learn about managing children's behaviour. It gives Tracey a good break from the children. She enjoys chatting with other parents and the relaxed tea-break. The crèche is free for all parents in the group.

There is also extra help for families with a new baby, and for families under stress. A health visitor goes to

the parent and toddler group every week. Tracey feels she knows her quite well, and is comfortable asking for advice on all sorts of issues.

Services like this are developing in 23 communities across Northern Ireland as part of Sure Start. The beauty of Sure Start is that no two projects are the same. The money is used to support all local families with children under four, but there are no rules on services that should be provided because decisions happen locally. Some run home safety schemes. Others offer toy libraries, antenatal sessions and extra play schemes. Most provide courses with crèches, advice and home visiting support.

Parents and carers of children under four years of age living in Sure Start areas can join. Membership is free.



Nigel Williams, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, attends the launch of Monkee See Monkee Do, an action rhyme book and CD funded by the Coleraine Sure Start Programme. Also pictured are Kim Aiken, Book Start Coordinator, NEELB, along with children who were involved with the project.

For more information about Sure Start, contact Seána Talbot, Regional Co-ordinator, by phone on 028 9052 0774.

Northern Ireland Childminding Association Careers working with children



Childminding lets you work from home, care for your own children and still earn money.

It has many benefits:

- Earn a living by caring for other people's children in your own home.
- Become a self-employed day-care provider.
- Share in the care and development of children.
- Register as day-care for the Childcare Tax Credit.
- Stay at home and care for your own children as well as others.
- Continued self development through training while earning.

Have you considered becoming a Registered Childminder to earn a living and still be able to look after your own children at home?

Tanya, a single parent from North Belfast, recommends childminding...

I became a childminder three years ago because it's a job I enjoy, it fits well around my children and means I can stay at home to look after them. As a single parent I can earn extra money on top of my benefit.

For an Information Pack, contact NICMA by phone on 028 9181 1015, write to the Northern Ireland Childminding Association, 16-18 Mill Street, NEWTOWNARDS, BT23 4LU, or e-mail info@nicma.org

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Employers for Childcare



There are two types of voucher schemes:

- 1. Employer Purchase**
The employer pays for the vouchers and issues them to staff in addition to their salary.
- 2. Employee Salary Sacrifice**
The employee sacrifices part of their salary for vouchers. The value of the voucher is deducted at source by the payroll department.

The savings

Working Parents - £250 worth of vouchers per month saves the employee **£27.50** on NIC per month.

Businesses - £250 worth of vouchers per month saves the employer **£32.00** on NIC per month.

Holding the baby & holding down a job

Bringing up children is rewarding, but not always for the budget! This is even more difficult for a lone parent, who is often the sole breadwinner!

High childcare costs deter parents from returning to work. Some feel like they only work to pay for childcare or wonder if it is worthwhile working at all.

Balancing family life & finances

Money Saving Childcare Vouchers

More parents and employers see the benefits of childcare vouchers. They are used to pay for all types of registered childcare, including registered childminders, day nurseries, crèches, playgroups, after-school and breakfast clubs, holiday play schemes and workplace nurseries.

To find out more contact **Joannah McStravick, Employers For Childcare** by phone on 028 9261 0661 or email joannah.mcstravick@employersforchildcare.org

Barnardo's – Supporting young parents

Barnardo's helps young parents identify important issues and work out the best way to deal with them. Usually these are stressful things, like money, relationships, housing, and behaviour problems.

There's an advice and information service for young parents throughout Northern Ireland. This includes

sessions for those needing help with benefits, maternity grants and housing. This can be linked to existing groups such as Sure Start and antenatal groups for young mums.

Young Parents' Network provides community-based support to those aged 22 and under and their children. One participant said - "It made me change the way I look at my situation. I got to meet people who have been through pregnancy and some young women like me, about to experience birth and what it means to be a parent."

School Age Mothers provides education, personal development and antenatal support to help young school age mums continue their education.

**For advice phone
028 9067 1992
For project information
phone 028 9047 3856
or email
ni.youngparents@barnardos.org.uk**

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Home Start Support for parents

Debbie, a lone mum from Lurgan, tells how she learned to cope as a single mum by helping other mums like her.

I wasn't coping. Looking back I realise that. My kids were aged one and three, my husband and I were separated nearly a year, my mum had just died of cancer and I was living on Income Support.

"I saw an advertisement from Home Start in the paper saying - 'Do you

remember when your children were small? Teething and no sleep?' Do I remember it? I was living it. What was I doing even thinking about volunteering to support another parent?"

"Then I thought - I have friends and family that I can cry to, talk to, tell them I can't go on. What would it be like to feel that and have no one? So I phoned Home Start and was surprised by the person on the other end. She seemed interested, like she really cared."

"I started volunteering and visited another mum who also happened to be a single parent. It was pretty easy really. She just talked about how she was feeling. One day we went to the park, my two kids and her three. I wasn't having a great day and shouted at my two for playing up. Afterwards she said 'you know

you've helped me. I thought I was the only one who shouted at the kids. Seeing you crack up makes me feel normal.' Then I realised I wasn't perfect and nor was she. Sometimes we lose it, but that's okay. That's parenthood."

"Thank goodness I picked up the phone to volunteer. Being a parent isn't easy, but being able to share how you feel definitely makes it easier."

**To find out more, phone
028 9046 0772 or visit
www.home-start.org.uk**

As a manager of men, Lawrie Sanchez is used to working out the best tactics when he comes up against a new situation.

Talking to ANNE HAILES about lone parenting, Lawrie Sanchez tells how he threw himself into his work and brings up his son.



Lawrie Sanchez became a single parent when his wife Heather died in 1998 following breast cancer. Their son was only three years old. Jack is now an enthusiastic young man of nine, plays in the local junior football team and he's been team mascot for Wycombe Wanderers when they faced Liverpool in the semi-finals of the FA cup at Villa Park in 2001. Heady stuff! He's well known in his hometown of Reading and without doubt, he and his Dad are really proud of each other.

Lawrie, recently appointed manager of the Northern Ireland football team, has a busy life but it still revolves around his son.

"For four years it was just me and Jack and it was a case of getting on with it, looking forward rather than looking back. Having a loving family around you is a great asset and being the boss was another big help! When Jack began primary school and didn't get out until 3.30, everyone knew I was out of the building at 3p.m. I'm really proud of him, I love the fact he enjoys football but there's no pressure. I remember the day Heather said that she didn't care what he ended up doing as long as he's happy and healthy and that sums it up for me too."

It hasn't been easy but Lawrie is his own man, coping with his own emotions, dealing with life the best he could. "Some people need support groups and counselling but I threw myself into my work and into my son. I had moments by myself when I thought why me? But I didn't dwell on those feelings, I had a young boy to bring up and I just got on with it." He admits he's been lucky.

"When I joined Wycombe in 1999 as manager I was able to fit my times round Jack's needs. Even when he was at nursery I was able to drop him off, go to work and then pick him up at tea time. I've continued that pattern as he's grown." He adds with a smile, "It was interesting being the only man along with all the mothers dropping off and collecting the kids but I must say they were most supportive." He stresses that family is even more important when a lone parent is juggling work and home life and how his sister Deborah and her partner Steve, and their two sons, became a vital part of the

Sanchez family and the natural place for overnight stays, with all the rough and tumble of three young cousins of much the same age growing up together.

"When I was with Wycombe and had away matches, it was for short intensive periods and he loved staying there. Now," he added, "when I'm in Northern Ireland he can often come with me but a lot of the time I work from home which makes it easier to be around for Jack as he grows up. I suppose in many ways I'm lucky as I get to see him a lot more than the average father sees his son."

Lawrie Sanchez's father was from Ecuador and his mother from Belfast. They met in London and married which meant their footballing son was eligible to play for Northern Ireland and eventually manage the NI team. Home is in Reading where Jack goes to the local school, has a good circle of friends and a father who adores him and happily, last year Lawrie's girlfriend Claire moved in with them and both Sanchez senior and junior have welcomed her into their home with open arms and a lot of love.

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The invisible man

Lone fathers share the common trials of all lone parents, although some issues are particularly difficult. When a man becomes a lone parent, people may rally round. However, their motivation is often based on the idea that he is incapable of raising children and running a home without a woman. If he chooses to stay at home to look after his children he may be viewed as odd. Many men still see their role as a breadwinner. To give this up means losing money and social contact with people outside the family. Also lone fathers are often unaware of the benefits they are entitled to.

Some need to develop new parenting skills quickly but don't know who to ask for help. Many feel out of place at Parent and Toddler Groups, which are almost entirely female. Sometimes children's friends are not allowed to visit, as parents may view the home as more dangerous with only the father present.

Practically, it can be difficult to find changing facilities that suit fathers and children. When teenage daughters reach puberty, who explains the 'facts of life'? What babysitter will come to the home of a man living on his own with children? How do you convince your employer that you must take time off if your child is sick?

Local support includes:

- **Parenting Helplines.**
- **Special events for men/fathers.**
- **Networks of people with common interests.**
- **Men's support groups.**
- **Counselling for males.**
- **Parenting courses.**
- **Adult education opportunities.**
- **Internet information eg www.mensproject.org**

For more information on local support contact Colin Fowler, The Men's Project, on 028 9031 0891 or email colin@mensproject.org



Northern Ireland Childminding Association



Women in the workforce

Childminding is significant for women returning to work and staying in the workforce. Childcare enables parents, particularly mothers, to work, or increase their hours in work. For many, this means lifting their families out of poverty. It also improves choice for women by helping them compete in the labour market on more equal terms.

Childminding is closely connected to the local community. The relationship with parents is more intimate than in most other childcare settings. It improves community capacity by creating training and employment opportunities for excluded groups, usually women. These help improve the lives and circumstances of families and children. Childminding encourages self-employment, enabling local women to develop their own small business at home, while continuing to care for their own children. Within rural communities suffering from a lack of childcare, childminding is often a more economically sustainable service than group care.

Childminders provide flexible, affordable support to families. Many families rely on a childminder to provide home based childcare within the child's own community. The daily one-to-one care and special relationship with the same adult helps meet the child's basic physical and emotional needs. This may be even more important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with special needs.

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Children are unbeatable

Children are Unbeatable! is a UK-wide campaign with two aims – to reform the law to give children the same protection as adults and to promote positive parenting.

It works with adults and children to develop a society that recognises children as holders of human rights, including the right not to be hit. Everyone, including a child, has fundamental rights to respect for their human dignity and equal protection under law. The purpose of changing the law is not to prosecute parents, but to send a clear message – it is no more acceptable to hit a child than to hit anyone else.

Positive parenting protects children from punishments that hurt and humiliate. It encourages children to understand how and why they should behave and develop skills to compromise. It rests on the loving relationship between children and parents, and focuses on good behaviour. Rewarding children motivates them to keep trying. Although positive discipline is not always easy, particularly when tired or stressed, it really helps achieve good behaviour. Whatever the issue – toilet training, table manners, quarrelling – making children feel good works far better than making them feel bad.



For more information contact campaign headquarters at 216 Belmont Road, Belfast BT4 2AT or phone 028 9065 2713.

Disability Action – Tackling disability issues

Disability Action aims to ensure that people with disabilities get their full rights as citizens. It supports inclusion, influences government policy and changes attitudes, in partnership with people with disabilities.

Main issues

The term 'disabled' is often applied only to wheelchair users, but it also includes people with hearing impairments, physical disabilities, visual impairment, learning disability, mental ill health and hidden disabilities like epilepsy and dyslexia.

The majority of people with disabilities are not born this way. Disability is rising sharply among those aged 50 plus. As our population ages, so will the demand for services. There are 203,000 people of working age in Northern Ireland with a disability. This equates to 1 in 5 people in the working population. Only 33% of all people with disabilities are employed, compared to 75% of people without disabilities. This adds up to a significant number facing social and employment barriers.

Day-to-day, a person with any disability faces common difficulties with public transport and access to buildings. Some obstacles include inadequate signage and lighting, high rising steps, problems with bus timetables and lack of information in accessible formats. There are many other areas to be tackled, including housing, mainstream education, benefits, sports and the arts.

Disability & the law

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) came into force in 1996. The final part becomes law in October 2004. It defined disability and made it illegal to discriminate against a person with a disability in things like employment. Part III will mean that service providers have to make a 'reasonable adjustment' to their premises to make them accessible. While this goes some way to eliminating discrimination, issues such as transport and education are not included.

For more information contact - Disability Action, Portside Business Park, 189 Airport Road West, Belfast BT3 9ED, phone 028 9029 7880 or Textphone 028 9029 7882.

Disability Action's services

- Access consultancy on the built environment.
- Community development – empowerment through training and support.
- Diversity matters – co-operation and partnership in the workplace.
- Employment support – opportunities to work alongside non-disabled colleagues.
- Events – changing attitudes and encouraging inclusion.
- Focus consultancy – high quality training on disability issues.
- Information & policy – specialist advice and information on disability issues.
- Mobility centre – promoting independence through advice and assessment on mobility.
- Training support – assisting young people in the government's Job Skills Programme.
- Transport advisory committee – ensuring access to the same travel choice, at no extra cost.
- Transport service – fully accessible transport for individuals and groups.

Arts in the community

Belfast Festival at Queen's

The 42nd Belfast Festival runs from 22 October-7 November 2004. The largest festival of its kind in Ireland celebrates the best of Northern Ireland's vibrant cultural scene, including theatre, dance, classical music, literature, jazz, comedy, visual arts, folk and popular music. Whether your passion is exotic or homegrown culture, challenging art or popular entertainment, good craic and good food or serious debate, there is something for you. Make the most of half-term with family events - some are free.

The fabulous opening night, aimed at families, should not be missed!

There are discounts for families and groups for many performances.



For full details, sign up for the official brochure (released in September) at www.belfastfestival.com or phone 028 9097 2600 or the box office on 028 9097 2626.

Old Museum Arts Centre



A varied programme of arts and entertainment includes theatre, dance, music, comedy and visual arts, as well as education and outreach events.

Regular shows for children, plus events for all ages, are good fun and excellent value. Live events concentrate on a mix of home-grown work, international hits and companies and artists new to NI.

OMAC is committed to introducing new audiences to live arts events and participation in the arts. Future plans include working with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Belfast City Council, Laganside and the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure to create a custom built 21st Century arts centre. This will be a social and cultural venue serving all communities.

For details on what's on phone 028 9023 5053.

Arts for young people

Creative Youth Partnerships is a ground-breaking initiative to develop youth arts, running projects throughout Northern Ireland. These are aimed at increasing participation in the arts and “unlocking creativity”.

The programme creates and sustains events and activities for people aged 3-25 years, creating better arts opportunities for children and young people and supports their learning, personal growth and social development. Look out for the programme in your child's school.

Full details are available at www.cypni.org

Freebie fitness

Getting fit doesn't have to cost a fortune. It needn't even cost a penny. Here are five fantastic ways to get fit when you're skint! By Dawn Addley

Video library

We've all got one, tucked away at the back of a drawer. There's nothing to be embarrassed about, your friends have them too. Why not join forces and swap exercise videos? Organise a Fitness Video Library.

The shops are swamped with workout videos from celebs offering weird and wonderful ways to get fit. Some are better than others, but you could find a workout you enjoy enough to do regularly. If you can find the motivation to work out at home, it can be a very effective way of fitting exercise into your daily routine. Make sure you have as few disturbances as possible and wear the correct clothing. After all, if you were in a real aerobics class you wouldn't nip out half way through to put on laundry!

Home gym

Chances are you and your chums have some exercise equipment that you once bought with good intentions. Ask around - you might be surprised. Check with work colleagues too. An exercise ball, some hand weights and a skipping rope are all you need.

Healthy hobbies

If you want to do something for others as well as yourself, find an active hobby. Conservation Volunteers NI have hundreds of volunteer opportunities guaranteed to get you active. Their Green Gyms improve your fitness with practical conservation activities like planting hedges, creating community gardens or improving footpaths. For further information contact Dianne Keys on 028 9064 5169 or visit www.cvni.org

Stepping out

Walking is a fantastic way to get fit and it's totally free. You can even take the kids (so you can't use that excuse). Wrap up warm, take a bottle of water and off you go.

Choose a route you are comfortable with and remember your personal safety and visibility.

It is important to think of it as 'exercise' though and not a 'dander'. Start and finish each session at a gentle pace for five minutes. Build up the time you walk gradually. Vary your route. Hills are great for your bum and thighs. Walk at a pace that challenges you but is sustainable. And don't forget your posture, it can make all the difference. At the end, take time to stretch. It will stop you feeling sore.



Dance yourself dizzy

Another fabulous exercise is dancing. You don't need a class or even a routine. Close the curtains, pump up the volume and get grooving in the privacy of your home. Solo performances tend to be the most energetic and creative! Or invite your friends round and make a night of it.

“The day I got married I knew I was doing the wrong thing.”

Pauline confides in ANNE HAILES how she had to get out of a nightmare which was destroying her and her children.

I've met a lot of impressive women - and men - during the writing of these features. Take Pauline for instance. She's a feisty athletic girl in her mid 30s with three school age children and a niece and nephew she looks after on Thursdays and Fridays. She's been in her new home for just over six months and the house rules apply, everything is shared, the children look after their rooms and take their turns doing the chores and everyone is happy.

But that happiness has been hard won.

Pauline's story goes back to her late teens when she met the man who was to become her husband. He was 32 but despite warnings about the age difference, she had fallen in love and that was that. They had many interests in common, mainly motor

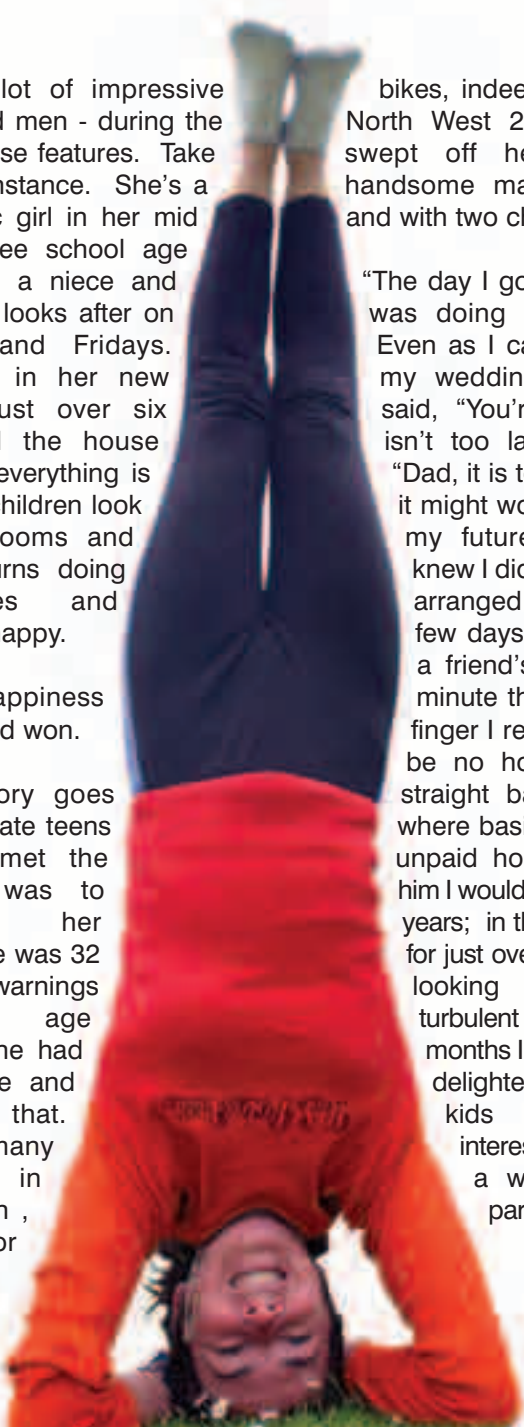
bikes, indeed they met at the North West 200 and she was swept off her feet by this handsome man, once married and with two children.

“The day I got married I knew I was doing the wrong thing. Even as I came downstairs in my wedding dress my dad said, “You're beautiful but it isn't too late”. I just said, “Dad, it is too late.” I thought it might work because I liked my future husband but I knew I didn't love him. I had arranged we would spend a few days honeymooning in a friend's caravan but the minute the ring was on my finger I realised there would be no honeymoon, it was straight back to his house where basically I became his unpaid housekeeper. I told him I would stay with him for 10 years; in the end I stuck it out for just over 13.” She pauses looking back over those turbulent years. “After three months I fell pregnant. I was delighted because I love kids but he wasn't interested so I suppose in a way I was a lone parent from the start.”

She was only 23 when her son was born but the baby never left hospital and despite care and medication, when he was seven and a half months old he died. Pauline never felt more alone as she was left to deal with her grief without the benefit of a caring husband.

She had three more children but because she was drained of energy with her abusive lifestyle, she became very ill and almost died. It was at that time a close girl friend suggested to her that her husband

“Eventually I got into yoga just to get out of the house and have an hour with other people. My husband was so possessive, he was a control freak who wouldn't allow me to go out and if I had to leave the house, he needed to know where I was going, who I'd be with and what time I'd be home.”



was evil, a difficult fact to face but gradually the young woman acknowledged that this was probably true.

It wasn't easy being married to a perfectionist, a man who dominated and expected total loyalty to his needs. She had tried to support him; been a bouncer in a night club, taxi driving, valeted cars from six in the morning until three the following morning, taking breaks only to get meals and look after the children after school. She even delivered leaflets, all to support her husband and pay off his debts.

"Then in November 1998 I took cancer. I didn't tell anyone I had a lump. I was so tired, even Hoovering was a total effort so I knew there was something seriously wrong. After two months I told my sisters and the kids I would have to go into hospital and my daughter said, 'Mum it might be cancer' so I told her 'I promise you I won't die, I won't leave you, we'll fight this.'"

And so they did, even her husband showed some sympathy although

she feels that was more because he liked her being dependent on him rather than a normal love. She feels stress brought on her illness yet her illness brought on a feeling of self-control and a love for people, even her husband.

"Suddenly I could understand it. I can now say it's not his fault, he never learned how to behave towards a wife and family, he thought his way was the right way. If I'd been willing to be a little housewife it would have been a successful marriage but I wanted my own life as well, to be able to develop and grow. That wasn't possible."

“It was June when I decided I'd had enough, I told him it was over and he went berserk.”

It was only after her cancer was diagnosed, the stress of losing all her hair during chemotherapy and having to face the months of treatment on her own that she made a decision about her life. When the day came that she could no longer cope with the burden of her marriage, she packed her bags and left.

Eventually she got housed and since then she has worked and saved and now she's settled in the house which has become a family home with plenty of room for the kids to have their own space.

"My health has been badly affected by all of this but now, for the first time in years, I feel I'm getting somewhere at last. We're very happy now. We've been through the trauma of leaving home to establish a new life, I just took the personal things - no iron or microwave so we've had to build from scratch!" But she left the children's clothes in their rooms just in case they wanted to go back to their father or even visit and, although they are in touch from time to time, none of the children have ever expressed a desire to go to him.



Her passion for yoga has lasted and is now giving her a good income. “I take yoga classes so I’m passing on these important teachings to other people.” Indeed, when the time came to appear in court for the divorce proceedings, she sat in the corridor in the lotus position and meditated! “I think it spooked my husband so it was the boot being on the other foot - I was intimidating him!” “But,” she added quite seriously, “it was not intentional, I simply had outgrown his strength and power.”

Pauline is a very generous and sincere woman. She reckons she was young and naive when she married and didn’t appreciate what she was getting into. On the other hand she wouldn’t change anything. She has her children and her life experiences and these have made her the strong individual she is today. She couldn’t have done without the support and understanding of her family, however, especially her parents who were able to give her a room while she tried to sort out accommodation. “Four of us in a room 8 feet by 10 feet and just so happy.”

It has been a struggle financially but the Working Tax Credit was a lifesaver and she was able to pay her bills and save a little towards the future. She makes up her money with a 16 hour working week and relaxes by meditating and watching television. She has friends who are soul mates and she has no desire for another relationship which might lead to marriage. She says she’s self sufficient today, selfish maybe but she says, you become selfish when you love yourself and you’re proud of yourself. It took cancer to teach me that but what I’d say to other women in my situation, don’t wait until something like cancer hits you before you value yourself. Ill-ease of the spirit causes disease of the body and negative thoughts are destructive.”



Looking back she says she was living under a false security when she married.

You can be lonelier living with someone than by yourself and from the children’s point of view they have a mother and a father in me and a grandfather and grandmother who are very important role models in their lives. I’m happy now and a happy mother means happy children. Contentment is hard to find but when you do find it, it’s beautiful.”

As we finished our chat and our coffee and as she shoed her three-legged cat out of my handbag, she said, “This is my third go at life and after marriage and cancer it’s going to be a good one and a long one! Positive mental attitude, that’s what’s important.”

National Minimum Wage - How much are you worth at work?

Everyone has the right to be paid the National Minimum Wage (NMW). Any employer not paying this could be breaking the law. The current rates are £3.80 per hour for 18-21 year olds and £4.50 per hour for people aged 22 and over. These apply to both part-time and full-time employees and will rise again in October 2004.

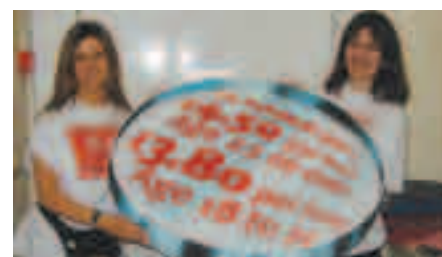
The National Minimum Wage Helpline (0845 6500 207) is run by Citizens Advice Bureau. It gives advice about the minimum wage to employers and employees. The Helpline advises what an individual can do when they are not receiving the NMW. It can approach an employer on their behalf.

It is often difficult for lone parents to find a job that fits in with their other responsibilities and they may feel pressurised into accepting lower paid work. Perhaps you are not

receiving the NMW and are unsure what to do? Or you have recently left a position where you were not paid the NMW? Some individuals receive arrears if they worked for less than the NMW in a previous job. If you are a lone parent considering moving from benefits back into work, you can contact the Helpline to make sure you receive the wage you are entitled to.

The Helpline is confidential and a trained adviser deals with queries.

Lines are open Monday-Friday from 9am-5pm. Outside these times, there is an answerphone service. An interpretation service is also available. You can email queries to nmw@citizensadvice.co.uk



Anne-Marie Marquess, left and Joan Davis NMW Information Officers at Citizens Advice Regional Office

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Co-Ownership Housing

For many people who would like to purchase a home of their own, Co-Ownership bridges the gap between renting and buying. It can be especially helpful for people on a single income. Nearly one Co-Ownership purchaser in five is a lone parent.



Homes costing up to £102,000 (up to £90,000 for a one to two bedroom property) can be purchased through Co-Ownership. There is a value limit for property in each district council area.

**Details are on
www.co-ownership.org**

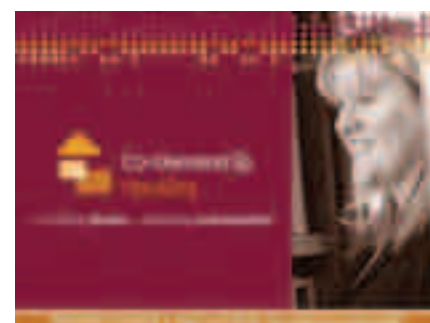
How it works

Perhaps a property costing £80,000 is too expensive for you. The Co-Ownership scheme may purchase part of the property for you and reduce the monthly costs, bringing a smaller mortgage within reach.

If your share is 50%, you take on a mortgage for half the cost of the property. Combined with a rent to Co-Ownership on the other 50%, this gives affordable monthly payments.

You can stay at your original percentage share for as long as you like or increase your share in slices of 12.5% or all at once. You buy your home on a shared ownership basis and so are treated as a home-owner. Co-Ownership does not provide housing for rent, or carry out repairs.

Everyone is assessed individually. To find out more contact Maura or Grace on freephone 0800 333 644 or email info@co-ownership.org



Owen Cormican has found a bonus in being a lone parent

He told ANNE HAILES he thinks he's a better person because of his new relationship with his sons.

Owen Cormican became a lone parent only six months ago and as he says, it's literally been a life-changing event. Now that his wife lives and works in England, the responsibility falls on this engaging man's shoulders.

He obviously loves the responsibility but he admits it's much easier for him than for most fathers in his situation.

"I have family all round me with two sets of grandparents willing and able to share the responsibility, I have a good job and both the boys are doing well at school."

But still there are times of loneliness and concern. "Being the only breadwinner means careful budgeting, the boys are both involved in sport with all the expense attached to this, and that's apart from the usual run-of-the-mill outgoings. Whereas before there were two wages coming into the house, now there's no comfort zone! Family Allowance and Child Tax Credits help but we sit and plan each week what we're all doing and so I get an idea of what it will all cost. It's a very structured life these days, time is a critical factor and re-adjusting has been a bit of a culture shock."

Following our conversation, Owen was dashing off to collect Dominic from school to take him to his Duke of Edinburgh award class, then dash off to buy Luke new football boots and then it was home to cook pork chops, carrots, peas and potatoes. "And apple sauce with cinnamon!"

The boys are in touch with their mother most days and meet up with her every six weeks or so and there is no bitterness between the couple which might affect the children.



“I suspect they talk about emotional things to their mum whereas I get the day to day problems to deal with and that is often difficult for me as I’ve no one to turn to to discuss their personal needs and worries. I find myself a little bit bereft; after a stressful day in work when I want to talk through my feelings, there is no one there. You do get lonely at times and there’s the lack of intimacy. But my priorities are with the kids and we manage very well. Dominic is 14 and has his own band, Four Minutes To Go and he’s good, I hope he’ll sign me up as his manager! Luke is just eight and he has his interests, a more analytical mind and it will be interesting to see how his career develops.”

Owen is manager of the Parks Department of Antrim Borough Council which involves a lot of travelling around the council area and when he’s on call at weekends, Luke will often travel with him. As a result the pair of them have built up a special rapport.

I’m enjoying my role as a single parent knowing that the boys still have the stability of a mother and father looking after their best interests.

“Of course I am aware that there are men much less well off than me, not only financially but with support and understanding in general. I’m enjoying my role as a single parent knowing that the boys still have the stability of a mother and father looking after their best interests. I am so much closer to my children and despite the personal loneliness, I think I’m a better person because of that new relationship. Mind you, the summer holidays are coming up and it will be my first experience of having them off school for a long period! We’ll see how we get on then.”

From his own personal point of view, Owen Cormican sums up lone parenting:



“Of course my life is now restricted, I can’t come and go as I please the way men do. It’s a big change to suddenly realise you have kids and they and their needs come first. Having said that, I’ve become involved and immersed in their lives and I love it, I don’t need to go out any more.”

Children's Commissioner

The first Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People is Nigel Williams, who was appointed in October 2003.

Main duties & powers

He safeguards and promotes the rights and best interests of children and young people. To do this he makes sure children and parents are aware of the functions, location and ways to communicate with him. His Office makes sure children can participate in decisions that affect them. A key aspect of the role is to listen to the concerns of children and young people, champion their rights and challenge government to make changes where necessary. He can review law, policy and practice in relation to children, to see if it is adequate and effective.

He is totally independent of government, which means his office can investigate almost any public body involved with children, informally or formally, and tell them how they should change to serve children better. If he is unhappy with their response, he can challenge them further, and publish the findings.

His investigative powers are the same as the High Court - he can instigate a Formal Inquiry with the right to summon witnesses, get documents and enter premises.

His Office does research to help children and issues guidance on best practice to those who provide services for them.



Marlene Kinghan, Head of Communications and Participation, NICCY along with children from St Joseph's Belfast, who are taking part in the Safer Routes to School pilot co-ordinated by Sustrans.

Contact the Commissioner's Office by phone on 028 9031 1616, email info@niccy.org or visit the website www.niccy.org

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Children's Law Centre's Freephone Advice

The Children's Law Centre helps children, young people, parents and professionals understand the laws affecting children in Northern Ireland. The Freephone Advice Service, called CHALKY (Children's Law Centre's Help and Advice Line for Kids and Young people), provides advice and information and refers people to a specialist legal service.

In its first six months the service averaged 28 calls per month. This has increased steadily - in the last six months it has averaged over 120 calls. The centre also expanded its legal unit, with an additional solicitor specialising in Education Law and an advice worker.

CHALKY has dealt with 5,154 issues within seven broad areas. Many requests for information come from children and young people. Education, is a key topic, with Special Educational Needs and suspensions/exclusions being the main issues. The centre has represented children at Expulsion Appeals Tribunals, Special Educational Needs Appeals, Admissions Appeals and challenged school decisions in Judicial Reviews. General enquires also include Social Security, Housing, Employment and 'At What Age?' issues. The centre represented children in Industrial Tribunals and the Small Claims Court. With regards to Family Law the main issues are - Contact and Residence, Parental Responsibility and Name Changes.

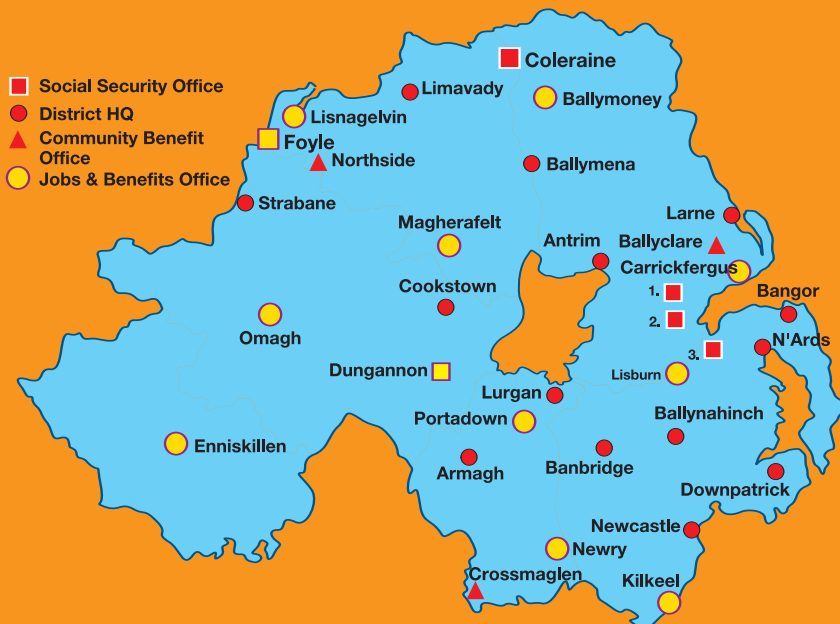
CHALKY monitors calls and uses this information to respond to consultations on law and policy proposals. This helps identify areas of concern to children and young people.

The service has information leaflets for children and young people covering the UNCRC, the Human Rights Act, Juvenile Justice, Being Looked After/ In Care, Employment, Social Security, Suspensions and Exclusions from School and Police Powers in Northern Ireland. A poster, At What Age Can I?, sets out the ages when children can legally do various things, including work, baby-sit, consent to treatment and get school records.

For advice or copies of leaflets or posters, phone 080 8808 5678 or email chalky@childrenslawcentre.org

Social Security Agency

Where we are and how to contact us



Call into one of the offices highlighted on the left. Address details can be found in the phone book under **Social Security Offices**.

Phone the **Benefit Enquiry Line**

Freephone 0800 220 674
(Minicom 0800 243 787)

The lines are open Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm, and provide information on the following:

- General information and advice on the full range of benefits.
- Personal benefit calculations.
- Phone completion of Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Invalid Allowance claim forms.

Alternatively access our website **www.ssani.gov.uk** for a comprehensive guide to our services for you.

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Child Support Agency

CSA contacts non-resident parents, resolves paternity disputes and calculates child maintenance. It establishes regular payments by telling parents the amount, arranging a suitable payment method and monitoring payments. It also keeps assessments up to date, pursues missing/late payments and liaises with other public bodies.

CSA accepts applications from parents with care, non-resident parents and others caring for the qualifying child, if all involved live in the UK.

Parents whose first assessment came into force before 3rd March 2003 had their maintenance calculated on the existing scheme. A new scheme was introduced to achieve faster, more reliable payments. Among other features, it has a simpler method of calculating child support and a flat rate for non-resident parents receiving benefits.

To apply call 0845 608 0022 (lines are open from 8am-8pm Monday to Friday and 9am-5pm on Saturdays) or e-mail BelfastCustomerHelpline@dwp.gsi.gov.uk



Barney McGahan,
Chief Executive
Child Support Agency

For more information visit
www.dsdni.gov.uk/csa/introduction.asp

Being a working mother is never easy.

For Caroline Harvey it started even before she became a mother but she worked through all the negatives and is now a positive success story, as ANNE HAILES discovered.

Caroline Harvey is a joy to talk to. She's full of chat about her job, her two children and her family. She has tackled being a lone parent in a positive way, in fact, she still considers her ex-husband as a role model in her children's lives. But then, Caroline is lucky, she has two big pluses in life - family support and Gingerbread. Between them they offer emotional support and the practical help so necessary when you have young children, especially when it comes to childcare for working women, so important to every young woman in the workplace today.

Today Rachel is 11 and her brother Matthew is nine and Caroline is self-employed and proud of her

latest venture, Northern Ireland Early Years, a parenting magazine which gives useful information, advice and entertainment in association with NIPPA - The Early Years Organisation.

This attractive and vivacious woman tackles her problems full on. She looks at a situation from every angle and at the end of the day, takes all that is positive and builds on it. When she and her husband began to grow apart they both agreed that the children must come first.

"We agreed not to use the children as a bargaining point and because he is a fantastic dad and as his parents are great grandparents, we've worked it out for the best for the children. He sees them every weekend, indeed any time he wants to. We have even agreed that the children spend alternate Christmases with us so we can each see their faces first thing in the morning when they see what Santa has brought."

"These are special moments for all parents so although we are no longer together neither of us should be robbed of those special memories!"



It's important that our children see us both acting for the good of them."

The couple met when she was 17 and she married at 22. Rachel was born two years later and Matthew two years after that. She was in full time employment but was able to arrange a job share when the children came along.

“Work and children are always a difficult thing to balance but with a good family structure we were able to cope and although the marriage didn't survive, we agreed to make sure the children remained our most important focus.”

She suffered pangs of guilt but then people like to put that pressure on women. As she says it begins with “Why haven't you had a baby yet?” “Why don't you breast feed?” “You shouldn't allow the baby in bed with you” and “How can you neglect the children by going out to work?”. And which mother hasn't experienced at least one of these comments!

Through work, she fell back into an adult way of life and it wasn't long before she had the confidence to talk to her husband and in-laws in a constructive way and as a result the relationship between both families has remained very good.

“The kids don't want for anything when it comes to love and attention and we have family times altogether so they have security as they grow up. You know, there's no instruction manual when it comes to marriage and parenting and when it doesn't work out you can't go back to the manufacturer and complain. I just had to get on with being a single parent so I have taught myself DIY, put up curtain rails etc, and I know how to get an airlock out of the heating system! - thanks dad for showing me.” She's obviously proud of this! “I have built up a good toolbox and my utility room has lots of useful spare parts stocked up and I know all the various types of nails in B&Q. I'm stubborn,” she adds, “I'll learn anything and try to fix whatever goes wrong - except electrics, there I insist on professional help.”

Caroline enjoys her own company sometimes and isn't in any hurry to settle down. She has a close set of seven girlfriends going back to primary school, all 35 years of age and most of them in the same situation as Caroline.

She loves her work and is dedicated to building a future for her and her children. As she puts it, ‘Early Years’ and her children are her life and she has a commercial marriage with her business partner, a single father with children. “We compliment each other,” she says, “I'm sales and marketing and James is design and as we have a lot of experience between us we know the magazine is going to be a very important part of life for mothers and fathers - also grandparents who these days are playing such a vital role in bringing up their grandchildren.”

She has her own personal advice for any woman, or man, going through a break up or juggling with all the ups and downs of lone parenting:



“It's important to identify what you are good at and build on that. Never let yourself go, take half an hour a week to pamper yourself. For me that's a really leisurely bath with a good book, scented candles and a glass of wine! And don't feel guilty, that's destructive and unnecessary, when you feel down just go and talk to your girl friends or someone you can trust. Since I've been on my own I've realised the amazing infrastructure there is out there for lone parents, support in every section of life as long as you know where to go for that advice. I got my help from Gingerbread and Home Start, easy people to contact and so friendly and helpful to talk to”.

EGSA – Guiding parents in learning

If you would like to return to learning but are unsure how, EGSA can help you understand your options and make decisions. You may already have a course in mind, in which case EGSA can provide information on where to do it and sometimes how to fund it. We can suggest where to go to brush up spelling, writing and maths.



EGSA works with anyone who is keen to progress in learning, particularly those who did not get the chance to fulfill their potential at an earlier age or who have little experience of learning.

Lone parents often put their learning to one side to raise their family. Many then want to return to learning to find a new or better job, help their kids in education or pursue a hobby or interest. They may face various barriers, including finance, childcare, self-confidence or lack of knowledge about courses or sources of information and support.

Guidance can help and the service is free and confidential. Ongoing support is available.

Claire, a lone parent with two children, emphasised the benefits of returning to learning - “I realised my children were growing up fast and would not be at home forever. I wanted to do something for myself, something that would provide fulfillment, satisfaction and the sense of value that comes from being paid for what you do. I was heavily involved in my local community, helping out in the after-school club, the children’s disco, the pensioner’s group and the local Home Start project.

I discussed the alternatives with an Adviser and decided my best option was an NVQ level 2 in Early Years. This would validate the skills and experience I already had working with children, an area which I really enjoy and get a lot of satisfaction from, as well as providing me with a recognised qualification so I could compete for a variety of paid jobs. Finance was an issue, but the Adviser referred me to a local community organisation which is going to pay the full cost.”

For more information about EGSA Connecting Adults with Learning phone 028 9024 4274 or email: info@egsa.org.uk

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Workers’ Educational Association – Lifelong learning

Workers’ Educational Association is Northern Ireland’s largest provider of lifelong learning and adult education. Today, somewhere close to you, a WEA class is running, perhaps in a community centre, business park, art centre, resource centre, a local school, or even a barn. Classes are mostly in community settings. Around 6000 people participate each year.

Opportunities for Women Learning enables women to play a full part in society, from ‘first steps’ education for those wishing to re-engage in learning, to promoting participation in public life and politics. Classes are available at different levels of accreditation and range from personal development, return to learn and leadership training.

Second Chance Initiative develops good practice in Essential Skills learning, as well as reaching into workplaces and communities to offer

an alternative point of entry to learning for adults.

Creative Learning Team develops links with the creative industries, with a strong emphasis on arts and crafts.

The Building Communities Team provides learning opportunities to collectives and groups to help develop their work.

To find out more visit www.wea-ni.com, email info@wea-ni.com or phone 028 9032 9718.

Useful Numbers

Lone Parent Advisers

Andersonstown	028 9054 2605
Antrim	028 9442 6476
Armagh	028 3752 2747
Ballymena	028 2566 2746
Ballymoney	028 2766 1029
Ballynahinch	028 9756 0531
Banbridge	028 4061 0815
Bangor	028 9127 9083
Carrickfergus	028 2826 3213
Coleraine	028 7034 1122
Cookstown	028 8676 8015
Corporation Street	028 9054 3396
Downpatrick	028 4461 1332
Dungannon	028 8753 3853
Enniskillen	028 6634 3244
Falls Rd	028 9054 2878
Foyle	028 7131 9567
Hollywood Rd	028 9052 8088
Kilkeel	028 4176 1413
Knockbreda	028 9054 5616
Larne	028 2826 3213
Limavady	028 7776 0558
Lisburn	028 9262 3380
Lisnagelvin	028 7131 9344
Lurgan	028 3831 5602
Magherafelt	028 7930 2055
Newcastle	028 4372 1632
Newry	028 3025 3051
Newtownabbey	028 9054 8282
Newtownards	028 9052 8758
Omagh	028 8225 4368
Portadown	028 3839 7282
Shankill	028 9054 3437
Shaftesbury Square	028 9054 5425
Strabane	028 7138 1023

Working Tax Credit	0845 603 2000 (Textphone 0845 607 6078)
Child Support Agency	0845 713 9896 (for existing scheme cases) 0845 608 0022 (for new scheme cases)
Housing Benefit	Your Northern Ireland Housing Executive/Rate Collection Agency details are in the phone book.
Jobs & Training Courses	Your Jobcentre/Jobs and Benefits Office details are in the phone book. (Listed under Government and in the Yellow pages under Government Offices).
In work Benefits Leaflets	To request leaflets about the individual benefits available whilst in work, contact your local Social Security Office/Jobs and Benefits Office.

DISCLAIMER: We have tried to ensure that all the figures and addresses contained in this publication are accurate at the time of going to press. You can contact your Lone Parent Adviser to obtain the latest information.

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Editorial Board

Marie Cavanagh, Aidan Graham, Simon Howe, Maeve Kelly, Rachel McAree, Martin McDermott, Marie McNeill, Geralyn Quinn

Features written and compiled by Anne Hailes
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