

Equality of Opportunity for Lone Parents

creating positive change through local and transnational partnerships



Executive Summary

November 2007

Introduction

The 'Possibilities' Development Partnership was established with the aim of creating positive changes for lone parents in Northern Ireland whose work options are limited because of barriers and inequalities. The Partnership, which was set up in October 2004, comprised the lone parents' support organisation, Gingerbread Northern Ireland, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the University of Ulster (UU), and the employment matching service, Gems Northern Ireland, as part of the European Union (EU) EQUAL initiative. This aims to meet the objectives of the European Employment Strategy by ensuring the widest possible access to employment.

The 'Possibilities' partners set out to pool their resources and expertise to positively influence policy and practice regarding lone parents and employment in Northern Ireland. The Partnership undertook a comprehensive study of the challenges facing lone parents in Northern Ireland, when making the transition to employment. It also developed an innovative training model to support lone parents wishing to return to work and established links with similar projects in a number of other European countries.

The following is a summary of a report of the work of the 'Possibilities' partnership: equality of opportunity for lone parents creating positive change through transnational partnerships.

Lone parents in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland there are approximately 92,000 lone parent families¹, over a quarter of all families. This is slightly higher than the proportion in Britain. Considerable evidence has emerged to demonstrate the particular disadvantages faced by lone parents. Within Northern Ireland, one parent families constitute the household type most vulnerable to poverty. While there has been some increase in employment levels for lone parents, only 43% of lone parents in Northern Ireland are in employment compared to 56% in Britain.²

Since the Labour party came to power in 1997, UK government policy towards lone parents has been underpinned by a 'welfare to work' ethos. This theme has been as evident in government initiatives in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the UK. To date, it remains a central aspect of the new Northern Ireland Executive's approach to lone parents here.

This approach is encapsulated by the Government's New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) which was introduced throughout the UK in 1998. In Northern Ireland, the NDLP is run by DEL which is responsible for both formulating and implementing training and employment policy here. It has implemented the NDLP largely in line with the way it has been run in Britain. However, there are two unique features to the NDLP here. Firstly, employers can receive a subsidy for up to six months for employing an NDLP participant. Secondly, NDLP participants can claim help with the costs of

¹ Gingerbread N.I 2005 Bright Futures

² Department for Works and Pensions (2007) 'In work, better off: new steps to full employment', CM 7130 London: DWP

informal childcare as well as formal childcare. Only assistance with formal childcare is available elsewhere in the UK.

The ‘Possibilities’ Development Partnership

It was in this context that the ‘Possibilities’ Development Partnership came into being in Northern Ireland. The Partnership was aware that there was a lack of local information about the particular barriers facing lone parents attempting to enter the labour market and the effectiveness of current measures designed to support them. It carried out a comprehensive research study which investigated the experiences and perceptions of lone parents, both in considering whether to enter the labour market, and once they had made the move into training or employment.

The Partnership also developed a training model which would be easy to replicate and which could be used to support lone parents to make decisions about employment. A total of 38 lone parents took part in the pilot of this innovative training model.

A key aspect of all projects funded through the EQUAL initiative is that they are required to develop links with similar partnerships in other EU countries. The ‘Possibilities’ Partnership worked with transnational partners to create the ‘Empower’ partnership which enabled it to exchange ideas, evidence and experience with EQUAL projects in Italy, Spain, Malta and Lithuania.

The research study

The research study focused on qualitative interviews with 82 lone parents in Northern Ireland. Of the 82 interviewees, 77 were women and 5 were men. Over a quarter of the interview sample had spent more than six years out of the labour market, while 13% had never participated in paid work. Many clearly lacked confidence in their skills.

Almost half of the interviewees were either current or past participants on the NDLP. A further 9 interviewees were drawn from ‘Choices’, an EU funded project run by Gingerbread Northern Ireland, which supports lone parents who wish to undertake a further education course. Finally, most of the participants on the ‘Possibilities’ pilot training programme were interviewed for the study.

One of the most notable features about this particular sample of lone parents was that they were more likely to hold NVQ skills qualifications at a higher level than is true for women as a whole in Northern Ireland. Moreover, a number of NDLP participants provided evidence which suggested that they were being encouraged to pursue career options traditionally regarded as female occupations, such as childcare or hairdressing, rather than examining a wider range of options. Participants on ‘Choices’ and ‘Possibilities’ tended to be more satisfied with the careers advice they were offered.

In general, most participants on each of the relevant programmes reported that they had benefited from them in some way. Many said the programme they followed had helped their self-confidence and made them realise they were capable of achieving their goals. The opportunity to gain work experience through both 'Choices' and 'Possibilities' was particularly highly valued.

A number of difficulties were raised by lone parents taking part in NDLP courses at Further Education Colleges. It was clear that a higher level of pastoral support was required to help lone parents overcome difficulties which arose around, for instance, problems with balancing course demands with other responsibilities.

The negative experiences relayed by a number of lone parents in this study demonstrates a need for awareness raising to address negative societal and professional attitudes. Because many lone parents did not have an established relationship with an NDLP Adviser, they were apprehensive about being viewed negatively. It was also evident, however, that initial fears could be alleviated once a lone parent had a positive experience with an Adviser.

It was clear that potential problems with childcare formed a major barrier to entering employment for many interviewees. A strong preference for the use of informal childcare within their extended families was voiced by most interviewees. Some said they were wary of leaving their children with 'strangers' and all those interviewed saw the cost of formal childcare as prohibitive. Several interviewees also reported difficulties in finding formal childcare provision sufficiently close to their home or place of work. There was also a strong desire to ensure that any childcare used by the interviewees should be of a high quality.

Participants on the 'Possibilities' programme were given the opportunity to use a crèche close to the venue used for the delivery of the training. This initiative was warmly welcomed by the interviewees on this particular programme.

A major barrier to entering the labour market for many interviewees was clearly concern about the financial implications of such a move. Nearly a third of the sample (31%) did not believe they would be better off financially if they participated in paid work. A further 23% said they did not know or were unsure whether they would be better off.

It was clear that, in some instances, the interviewees lacked sufficient information about their entitlements, and that some of their anxieties arose from uncertainty of the actual financial impact of a move into employment. However, many were concerned they might lose Housing Benefit if they took a job because of the gap between high rent costs in the private rented sector and Housing Benefit levels.

A final notable feature of the interview sample was the prevalence of stress. Almost all interviewees reported that they suffered from it, and more than two-thirds said they were experiencing chronic long-term stress. The main reported cause of stress among the interviewees was having to cope on their own. 23% cited financial difficulties as a source of stress.

The 'Possibilities' training model

It was clear from research and programme evaluations available to the Partnership that many lone parents were interested in entering employment, but lacked the confidence and knowledge required to take this important step successfully. Thus, 'Possibilities' decided to offer a more holistic programme which would enable each individual to take stock of every aspect of their life, including their potential career, in a supportive environment.

The Partnership drew on the services of a life coach who provided a wide range of advice and support to lone parents who took part in piloting the training model. Each trainee also undertook a short period of work experience, and was able to call on the expertise of Gingerbread's staff for advice and information. The training pilot which ran for 14 months from October 2005 was delivered at a venue in central Belfast, close to Gingerbread's headquarters and its crèche facility was made available to trainees.

Since graduating from the programme the majority (63%) of the trainees have either obtained paid employment (18%) or progressed into further education or training (45%). A small number have gone on to voluntary work or are actively seeking work (11%). The rest are either receiving further support or, having taken account of their care responsibilities, have decided that paid employment was not appropriate for them at this time. However, the benefit of the course for the individuals involved cannot be measured solely in terms of relatively short-term education, training and employment outcomes.

One of the key objectives of the training pilot was to assist participants in obtaining long-term sustainable employment, rather than a shorter-term 'quick fix' job. There was a particular emphasis throughout the programme on providing all the necessary support to enable each participant to focus on developing and implementing a long-term career plan.

An independent evaluation of the project found that participants reported the following benefits:

- Higher levels of self confidence and belief
- Positive attitudes towards seeking, obtaining and sustaining employment
- An ability to clarify goals and to focus on the future, providing a sense of direction
- Friendships and reduced isolation
- An improved understanding of Government provision and how to access it

Transnational partnership

The Northern Ireland Development Partnership worked with other partners to create 'Empower', a transnational partnership which brought together EQUAL projects from Italy, Spain, Lithuania and Malta. 'Empower' created a website dedicated to promoting the work of its projects and of the wider EQUAL initiative. This enabled the partners to share information and resources. Each partner also hosted a visit which facilitated the exchange of knowledge and expertise. During these visits, researchers from the University of Ulster undertook a small-scale piece of research on the situation of lone parents in each of the partner countries.

As a result of the 'Empower' project, lone parents are beginning to be more recognised as a group with distinct needs in each of the partner countries. In particular, these countries have been able to learn from the experience of organisations in Northern Ireland the work with lone parents.

Following on from 'Empower', a wider European network, 'CONNECT' (Co-operation Network for Citizenship and Training), has now been developed which will provide further opportunities to explore the needs of lone parents at European level.

Mainstreaming outcomes

One of the key aspects of the EQUAL initiative is that it should act as a laboratory for developing innovative ideas which can then be incorporated into mainstream policies and provision. The 'Possibilities' Development Partnership has had a number of important outcomes within Northern Ireland in this regard:

- 1** The training pilot has been incorporated into the new 'Pathways to Work' for Lone Parents provision
- 2** NVQ level 3 training is now available to lone parents who are on the 'Steps to Work' Programme currently being piloted in four geographical locations
- 3** New information materials have been produced for lone parents taking part in NDLP
- 4** Staff from Gingerbread have been seconded to DEL
- 5** Training and information sessions have been delivered by the University of Ulster and Gingerbread to DEL staff
- 6** Research findings have been submitted to the cross-departmental Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) Working Group on Lone Parents led by OFM/DFM and the partnership is represented on the PSI Working Group

Conclusions

The 'Possibilities' Development Partnership has identified the main factors influencing lone parents in any decision to enter employment, and the factors which help to contribute to a successful transition to work outside the home. The project has also enhanced the project partners' understanding of the perspective of lone parents, and of the multi-faceted and varied nature of their experiences.

The project has demonstrated very clearly that the circumstances of lone parents have to be addressed holistically – both in terms of each individual and at a wider policy level. In particular, the success of this particular partnership illustrates the value of public bodies and NGOs working together in this way.

The research highlights the need to pay attention to the way lone parents construe decisions about employment and the care of their children. The data strongly suggests that policies which coerce rather than empower lone parents vis-à-vis employment are unlikely to be effective.

Summary of recommendations

The policies pursued by both the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government need to ensure that:

- 1** The decision by lone parents not to take on paid work is respected by both the UK government and Executive Departments. Where lone parents take the decision to go out to work they should have access to the following:
 - Training which results in qualifications as appropriate. While mainstream provision focuses on helping people into work through access to entry level qualifications (up to NVQ Level 2), our research indicates, some lone parents in NI would benefit from access to non mainstream programmes that complement and extend mainstream provision.
 - Financial support while training or studying
 - High quality careers advice which avoids stereotyped notions of ‘appropriate’ occupations and encourages lone mothers to enter into non-traditional occupational areas
 - Support for participants on NDLP programmes prior to and throughout training, including the provision of a higher level of pastoral support within Further Education Colleges.
- 2** The development of an integrated childcare strategy that would result in good quality affordable childcare for lone parents.
- 3** Lone parents have access to affordable housing through greater provision of social housing and that the gap between Housing Benefit levels and the cost of private sector accommodation is addressed through assessment of ‘fair’ rent and a ceiling being imposed on private sector rents.
- 4** Benefit levels provide sufficient funds to enable lone parents outside the labour market to lead a healthy life.
- 5** The Gender Equality Strategy action plans drawn up by all the N.I Government Departments address the key issues restricting lone parents’ opportunities to participate equally in the labour market
- 6** The ‘Possibilities’ Development Partnership be used as a template for future working relationships between public bodies and the voluntary sector as the continuation of this approach will be of benefit to lone parents.



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