




**LONE PARENTS
AND WORK IN
NORTHERN IRELAND:**
Issues for Policy Makers

July 2009



Lone Parents and Work in Northern Ireland: Issues for Policy Makers

Introduction

Welfare reform measures introduced by the Labour government in December 2008¹ require lone parents to take steps to prepare for and seek work. Lone parents with children aged 12 or over from November 2008, 10 or over from October 2009 and 7 or over from October 2010 will be required to seek work. Those with children aged 3-6 will be expected to prepare for work. This includes a requirement to attend Work Focused Interviews and undertake work related activity – such as training. These welfare reforms are the latest in a series of measures, beginning with the New Deal for Lone Parents introduced in 1997, to get more lone mothers into the paid labour market.

This policy paper sets out the complex realities surrounding lone parents and paid work in Northern Ireland. It is derived from research undertaken by the University of Ulster, in partnership with lone parent organisation Gingerbread NI as part of the 'Possibilities' project supported by the European Union's EQUAL programme and the views collated at a lone parents and employment conference hosted by the Possibilities project in June 2008. The research was based upon individual interviews with 82 lone parents from throughout Northern Ireland. It revealed that despite the challenges they face, many lone parents have aspirations to take on paid work. However, their ability to do so is limited by a range of obstacles including; low pay, insecure jobs, inadequate childcare provision, ill-health, skills/qualification deficits and /or lack of recent work experience. Alternatively, some lone parents expressed the need to or desire to remain at home and care for their children, particularly when they are young. The full research report is available at

www.gingerbreadni.org

The outline of this brief is as follows. The experiences of lone parents are looked at under three main headings. Each section is followed by a discussion of policy measures and recommendations.



1. Lone parents: poverty, housing, health and well-being

More than a quarter of all families with dependent children in Northern Ireland are headed by a lone parent and the statistics relating to their economic situation are stark. They have the lowest standard of living of any household type and are more than twice as likely to be poor². Around half of the 100,000 children currently living in poverty in Northern Ireland are in one-parent households³. 72% of children in persistent and severe child poverty in Northern Ireland live with a lone parent⁴. The research for the Possibilities project found financial difficulties to be a major source of stress, and many interviewees reported that they had fallen into debt. It also revealed examples of lone parents doing without food and heat to ensure that children were provided for.

Yet, poverty and lone parenthood don't have to go hand in hand. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden all have among the highest proportions of one parent families in the developed world, yet their lone parent employment rates are higher than in the UK (in Sweden 86% of lone parents are in employment) and child poverty rates are amongst the lowest in the developed world⁵. This high level of labour market participation is facilitated by an extensive public child care system, the historical emphasis on full time adult labour market participation, a large public sector and parental leave policies which better enable parents to combine work and family responsibilities⁶.

The Northern Ireland draft anti-poverty strategy 'Lifetime Opportunities' published in 2006, recognises the vulnerability of lone parents and their children to poverty. However, it emphasises paid work as the main route out of poverty and does not sufficiently address the link between benefit levels and poverty. It also appears to reject strong conditionality stating that 'For all parents, having the choice to work, or not, during the early years is a decision which families should be able to make for themselves'.

Conference participants clearly wanted to see the Northern Ireland Executive take a more pro-active role in addressing lone parent poverty.

Some of the Views of Conference Participants

- ▶ That poverty stripped individuals and families of dignity and contributed to their marginalization therefore a cross departmental group should take a stronger lead on poverty and all departments should be obliged to identify and introduce measures to address poverty
- ▶ MLAs should lobby at Westminster for enhanced social security benefits
- ▶ The problem of low pay needs to be addressed as does the link between pay and benefit entitlement

Recommendation 1: Much research on poverty has pointed to the need to link benefits levels to average earnings and to the fact that poverty reduction targets can not be met without addressing this issue. The Executive should outline how it will work to achieve this.

Recommendation 2: Many lone parents do not claim the benefits they are entitled to. Gingerbread Northern Ireland, for instance, helps one parent families recoup unclaimed benefits to which they are entitled, generating thousand of pounds of new income for lone parents and their children each year . The Executive should ensure that these services are sufficiently resourced to expand this work.

Recommendation 3: The Executive should research and promote models of affordable credit to low income families, providing alternatives to extortionate lending practices.

Housing

Department of Social Development housing and

homelessness statistics show that the lack of suitable social housing creates difficulties for one parent families. In the research carried out for the 'Possibilities' project, finding extra money to supplement Housing Benefit to pay for private rented accommodation, out of an already minimal income, resulted in hardship and stress. Loss of Housing Benefit was also one of the biggest concerns for lone parents thinking of moving into work. The Northern Ireland Executive has acknowledged that there is a housing affordability problem and has taken some steps to extend the provision of social housing. These measures are unlikely to be sufficient to meet the needs of all lone parents, many of whom will have to rely on the private rented sector.

Recommendation 4: Accurate information needs to be available on the extent of the problem whereby lone parents have to supplement Housing Benefit in order to pay rent. Lone parents should be represented in policy discussions resulting from the Housing Affordability Review and in consultations about any proposed changes to Housing Benefit.

Health and Wellbeing

Studies across the UK and elsewhere have indicated that lone mothers are more likely than the general population to experience poor health. Stress was a major problem for participants of the research with more than two-thirds reporting chronic stress. Recent analysis of the Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey showed that mothers of children in poverty were significantly more likely to have poorer mental health and wellbeing than parents of children who were not in poverty⁷.

Recommendation 5: Much of lone parents' vulnerability to ill health can be attributed to poverty and we have identified recommendations relating to the adequacy of benefit and tackling low pay. In addition, lone parent support organisations and other parenting support initiatives should be adequately resourced to provide appropriate support. DHSSPS should ensure that health professionals are aware of the stresses faced by many lone parents and the impact on their physical and mental health.



2. Lone parents and employment

Some of the growth in employment levels among lone parents can be attributed to the success of the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). However, much of the growth in employment levels occurred during the first two years of the programme. The rate of increase in employment has subsequently slowed⁸. Furthermore training provision under New Deal has for the most part been restricted to NVQ qualifications up to Level 2.

In Northern Ireland, the Possibilities Project, in addition to carrying out research, developed models of good practice in the delivery of programmes for lone parents, including personalised support and work experience. Aspects of this good practice were trialed through the pilot of the Pathways to Work for Lone Parents. In addition to work preparation support and mentoring, this programme also included an enhanced range of measures to help lone parents into paid work. It included a return to work credit of £40 a week, and access to an in-work emergency fund. The available evidence in Britain suggested that this was effective in encouraging lone parents into work⁹.

In Northern Ireland, from September 2008 the Steps to Work initiative replaced the New Deal programmes. It is based on the notion of modular provision, whereby what is provided can be linked to individual need and it is argued that this will facilitate a greater degree of flexibility and responsiveness. However, since this programme was devised economic circumstances have changed quite dramatically. Labour market statistics show that the number of people unemployed has increased by 11,000 in the year preceeding May 2009. Northern Ireland has the highest economic inactivity rate of the 12 UK regions¹⁰. Some of the biggest job losses have been in the service sector, a sector with a high proportion of female employees.

A major theme emerging from the conference workshop on

Views of Conference Participants about what measures would support entry into employment

- ▶ Participants supported the idea of an employer forum to bring employers together, educate and disseminate best practice
- ▶ Public transport is failing lone parents- many of whom do not have access to a car. The lack of public transport in rural areas needs to be a policy priority and lone parents should have access to subsidised public transport
- ▶ Training provision needs to be more flexible in terms of location, greater and more relevant choice and with access to higher level qualifications

employment was 'Flexibility' – on the part of employers, flexible provision in training and flexible childcare provision.

Recommendation 6: It is vital that DEL addresses the problems inherent in the previous programmes and builds on the successes. There have been problems in the following areas: poor job retention and lone parents 'cycling' between jobs and benefits caused by the 'work first' ethos of the NDLP; low pay (In Northern Ireland 57% of part-time working women are employed in the three lowest paid occupations.¹¹); inflexible workplaces (or perception of inflexibility); lack of appropriate skills development and lack of appropriate ongoing support for lone parents returning to work. The new Steps to Work Programme should be evaluated at an early stage in terms of the participation of lone parents and its impact on lone parent employment. The impact of the economic recession on the referral and recruitment of lone parents should

be carefully monitored to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in an increasingly competitive employment and training market.

Recommendation 7: Training and support for lone parents wishing to return to work in Northern Ireland should be focused on facilitating sustainable employment and any targets introduced should reflect this goal. Skills development, including while in employment will contribute to lone parents being able to progress in work. Many lone parents returning to employment require on-going support. Consideration should be given to whether this would best be provided by relevant NGOs.

Recommendation 8: Lone parents should receive individual, non gendered training and careers advice and be encouraged to take up training and employment in non traditional areas. Advice should include pay rates for jobs usually done by women and those usually done by men. To help address low pay the Executive should ensure that women's part-time earnings reach, and keep pace with those of full-time working women.

Recommendation 9: The potential for lone parents to achieve earnings beyond the minimum wage is limited by current restrictions limiting opportunities for most training to NVQ Level 2. Lone Parents on training and employment programmes should have access to qualifications beyond this to enhance progression in the labour market and have a positive impact on labour market retention.

Transport

One significant barrier lone parents face in trying to access employment is the lack of a good public transport infrastructure in Northern Ireland. More than half of all lone parent families in Northern Ireland do not have a car. In stark contrast, just 5% of families headed by a couple here lack this means of transport¹². Better and more affordable public transport is urgently needed throughout Northern Ireland in order to enable lone parents and other individuals on a low income to have easy and equitable access to employment opportunities. However, in the short to medium term, there is a real need to

address the transport barriers to employment faced by lone parents with an effective, targeted programme.

Case study

In Merseyside, the local transport authority, MerseyTravel, has launched a successful £3 million initiative called Let's Get Moving which aims to address social exclusion caused by lack of access to transport. One

important element of this scheme is of particular relevance to lone parents. Dial a Link brings demand-responsive transport to the door of participants, enabling them to use the scheme for access to and from work¹³.

Recommendation 10: Department for Regional Development and the Department for Social Development should jointly initiate a scheme similar to the Let's Get Moving initiative in Merseyside. This should include the creation of Dial a Link demand-responsive services to enable lone parents and other socially excluded groups to access employment opportunities, and a WorkWise Travel Card providing one month's free travel to job interviews and workplaces for individuals living in designated areas of deprivation.

Childcare

One of the issues raised by many participants in the research carried out by the Possibilities Partnership was childcare. There is no doubt that the lack of affordable, accessible childcare is a significant barrier for many lone parents in accessing employment opportunities. A comprehensive international comparative OECD study has highlighted the costs to both the public purse and the economy where governments fail to develop and implement effective childcare policies¹⁴.

Childcare provision in Northern Ireland lags well behind that in England in a number of respects. The NI Executive has, to date, failed to deliver on the UK government ten-year childcare strategy published in 2004¹⁵ which promised delivery of an "affordable, flexible, high quality

childcare place that meets their circumstances for "all families with children aged up to 14 who need it. In England by 2010 every local authority.

Views of Conference Participants on Childcare

- **An integrated childcare strategy for working parents across Northern Ireland developed and implemented by a cross-departmental task force led by the Department of Education;**
- **The result should be standardisation of access across rural and urban areas, affordable and high quality provision.**

area will have a Children's Centre. These are designed to offer an integrated, holistic range of services to children and their families. In the most deprived areas, the government stipulates that the services offered by Children's Centres should include full daycare and a base for a childminder network¹⁶. There are no such plans for Northern Ireland.

Conference participants demanded a range of actions in relation to childcare. These included:

Recommendation 11: The Department of Education should ensure that comprehensive daycare provision is developed. Sufficient resources should be allocated to ensure that this provision is of high quality, geographically accessible and is affordable to lone parents. Lone parents have raised the considerable difficulty created by children being looked after in childcare facilities and/or in schools some distances apart. Priority should be given to the establishment of Children's Centres offering the full range of integrated services and to supporting extended schools provision by 2010 .

A further issue, specific to Northern Ireland, is

the practice of primary schools here to finish 2pm for P1 – P3 classes, but at the later time of 3pm for P4 – P7 classes. These differing finish times can present a significant challenge for both childcare providers and working (and non-working) parents, particularly in rural areas.

Recommendation 12: Department of Education should consider the standardisation of school hours so that parents or carers can pick up all primary-age children at the same time or at least that facilities are available for all children to stay in school until at least 3pm.



3. Gender and Lone Parenthood

Many of the challenges facing lone mothers stem from women's unequal position in society more generally. Conference participants believe more should be done to challenge gender stereotypes.

The need to address this has been recognized by the NI Executive and the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland (OFMDFM, 2006), sets out a policy framework for achieving gender equality which acknowledges that 'Achieving gender equality for women will require positive action measures' (para 1.4). Among the key action areas identified (para 2.9) are childcare/caring, education, access to employment, the gender pay gap and women and decision-making. The practical implementation of the principles and measures set out in the strategy is to be through a cross departmental action plan.

Policy on lone parents needs to take account of gender divisions in work and employment and the way in which women's choices about paid work are shaped by social and political assumptions and expectations about their domestic and caring work. A policy which attempts to move lone mothers into employment without addressing other fundamental gender equality issues is likely to be unsuccessful. Therefore, as a starting point, the following actions should be taken:

Recommendation 13: DEL should ensure that it fully implements the recommendations of the Women and Work Commission which reported in 2006, including ensuring that the Careers Strategy is gender proofed and that lone parents are encouraged and supported to train in and take up employment in non-traditional areas.

Recommendation 14: OFMDFM should ensure that the Gender Equality Strategy is implemented, that the gender action plans developed by Departments clearly show how each department will take action to address the disadvantages experienced by lone parents because of their gender.

Views of Conference Participants on Tackling Gender Stereotyping

- **Addressing gender stereotypes needs to start in school.**
- **Many training and education providers continue to offer poor and highly gendered careers advice.**
- **Very often confidence is a factor in lone mothers not considering non traditional areas of employment – the opportunity to avail of ‘job tasters’ was proposed.**
- **Lone fathers also faced a problem of gender stereotyping and more has to be done to challenge social attitudes**

parents. The only major evaluation conducted in 2002¹⁸ was unable to produce findings of real value due to a lack of robust data. An Education and Training Inspectorate Survey published in 2007 made a number of recommendations linked to evaluation and quality of programmes¹⁹. It advised that DEL review its procedures for recording data on retention, success and progression. There is a paucity of easily accessible and useful demographic and economic data relating to lone parents in Northern Ireland. In particular, DEL should ensure that up-to-date information on employment rates, and on economic and inactivity rates relating to lone parents is published on a regular basis.

The core messages from this policy paper are that lone parents often want to work but that they have to be able to reconcile employment with the care of children. There is no evidence of the need for compulsion. The goal of achieving higher labour market participation levels rests on the policy issues outlined in this paper being addressed.

Conclusion

While the government recognises the right of parent couples and carers to have a choice as to whether they work, it does not recognise this right for lone parents.

The current policy of placing more conditionality on lone parent's access to benefits and the targets to be placed on providers are particularly unrealistic in current economic circumstances. Moreover, the international evidence on the adoption of this 'welfare to work' type of approach suggests it may well be counterproductive and could push some lone parent families further into poverty¹⁷. This is a particular danger in Northern Ireland given the extent of low pay. Of particular concern is the fact that lone parents in Northern Ireland will be subject to the same harsh rules on seeking work, despite the lack of support (especially childcare provision) available to lone parents elsewhere in the UK.

Government in NI should also ensure better analysis of the impact of programmes for lone

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