

Changes in the support of lone parents

The main proposals issued by the Department of Social and Family Affairs include:

- Replacement of the current One Parent Family Payment and Qualified Adult Payment with a new means tested Parental Allowance payment. This would be available to all parents on low income or social welfare regardless of whether they are single, cohabitating or married.
- This payment would be paid up to when the youngest child is aged eight when the parent is then required to work and / or enrol in training or switch to an unemployment assistance payment.
- No direct assistance will be given towards childcare costs except the €1,000 announced in Budget 2006 to be given to all parents with children under 6 years of age. However, it is suggested that the FAS Job Facilitator will assist parents with their childcare needs through the provision of information and possible targeted support and parental allowance recipients will be given priority in accessing childcare places. However, it is unclear how this would work in practice.
- There will be an extension of the teen parenting programme across the country. This could include up to 22 year olds but participation in the programme could be a condition for receiving the parental allowance.

Barnardos attended the open forum on these proposals in Farmleigh on 27th April 2006 and also compiled a submission and while the key principles of the proposals are welcome there a number of concerns including:

- The withdrawal of the parental allowance could have a negative impact on child poverty, as it will lead the development of age related poverty traps.
- The rationale of withdrawing the parental allowance when the child turns eight is unclear. An older age threshold would be more appropriate as the child would be in secondary school and have developed more independence.
- The compulsory nature of encouraging parents, particularly lone parents, to return to the labour market or education is unfair. The extension of the current process of engagement will be inadequate if realistic, suitable options provided through FAS, other training organisations and employers are not provided along with the availability of comprehensive services such as childcare to facilitate this participation. Also for parents who wish to be a full time parent or those whose caring role is full time due to their child's illness or disability, this compulsory expectation places undue burden of pressure on them.
- The lack of childcare provision will seriously affect parental ability to participate in training and employment.
- The compulsory nature of the extension of the teen parenting programme is not the most effective way to meet the needs of teen parents.

The Department of Social and Family Affairs will give consideration to all submissions received and a further update on these proposals is expected later this year.