

Lone Parents: Profile, Policy and Provision

A local study commissioned by Doras Buí
and Northside Partnership



Doras Buí Mission Statement

Doras Buí is a self-directed and managed community development resource centre that provides high quality supports and services to one parent families living in the catchment area*.

We aim to support lone parents to extend their life choices, overcome discrimination and isolation, and become socially and economically independent.

We support and recognise family diversity, promote society's understanding of the needs of one parent families, and campaign to change policies that negatively affect them.

All our activities are delivered to lone parents and their children in a spirit of solidarity and professionalism and are guided by the following principles:

- Access to accurate information.
- Self help.
- Meaningful participation.
- Campaigning for social and policy change.

Our organisational philosophy aims to encourage social and economic self-reliance, confidence, and the development of skills.

*The Doras Buí catchment area includes the districts of Priorswood, Darndale, Bonnybrook, Kilmore, Artane, Donnycarney, Harmonstown, Coolock, Edenmore, Donaghmede, Balgriffin, Raheny, Ayrefield, Baldoyle, Kilbarrack, Grange and parts of Beaumont, Killester and Sutton.

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Funded by the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

Grainne Healy
Independent Consultant
May 2004

Acknowledgements

Doras Bui and the Northside Partnership wish to thank the Department of Social & Family Affairs for their support in funding this research.

Many thanks also to Grainne Healy, Training & Development Consultant for conducting the research on our behalf.

This research report was only made possible by the invaluable contribution of the sixty-four lone parents who shared their experiences and insights so generously; to each and everyone of you we owe a special debt.

Foreword

Doras Buí - a parents alone resource centre - was founded in 1986 as part of the EC second programme to combat poverty.

Formerly known as Parents Alone Resource Centre (PARC), Doras Buí was the first locally-based resource centre for lone parents and their children in Ireland.

We have been at the forefront locally and nationally in the provision of services for lone parents and their children and have established a reputation for quality and innovation.

In 1994 we were instrumental in funding O.P.E.N. (One Parent Exchange Network) the national network of lone parent self-help groups. O.P.E.N now has membership of over 70 lone parent self-help groups.

Our organisation philosophy encourages economic independence, self-confidence and the development of skills. Listening to the needs of lone parents using the centre has led us to experiment with different activities and approaches and in this way we have developed a self help model of provision which has had considerable success and is being replicated by lone parent self-help groups in disadvantaged communities throughout Ireland.

Alongside our work with lone parent families, Doras Buí continues to campaign for policy and attitude and change which recognises family diversity, support economic independence and improves the quality of life for the lone parents and their children.

Northside Partnership has developed excellent working relationships with organisations in the private and public state and community / voluntary sectors. It was through this co-operation and collaboration with its strategic partners that dramatic success was achieved with long term unemployment redundancy by 51.4% within the catchment area as against 21% nationally in the three year period 1997- 2000.

The partnership concentrates its efforts on individuals, families and groups who are not fully included in the social and economic life of the area. Among its target groups are lone parents.

Working within the same catchment area, Doras Buí and Northside Partnership have collaborated successfully in the past to develop and implement initiative projects initiatives and services for lone parents.

Since July 1999, Doras Buí / Northside Partnership catchment area has seen a rise in claimants of OPFP (One Parent Family Payment) of 31.4%. According to figures from the Department of Social and Family Affairs are now 4,860 OPFP claimants in the catchment.

Despite the economic growth in Ireland in the 1990's this increase of over 31% of OPFP claimants in the last four years was seen as a serious development which required examination as it has implications for the provision, uptake, resourcing and development of services available to lone parents families in the catchment.

While 1,250 lone parents received supports from Doras Buí and the Northside Partnership, a significant number of the 4,860 lone parents in receipt of OPFP were not coming forward for support. This had inevitably raised questions for us with regard to the level and type of supports required by lone parent families.

This research was conducted: to establish contact with some of the lone parents in receipt of one One Parent Family Payment who were not availing of services in the catchment; and to identify their support needs in order to continue developing innovative initiatives to meet the needs of lone parent families as identified by lone parents.

It is through this process of consultation and collaboration that Doras Buí will continue to support lone parents to extend their life choices, overcome discrimination and isolation and become socially and economically independent.

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Chapter 1

Executive Summary

Profile

The typical profile of a lone parent emerging from this small study of 64 lone parents not currently using Doras Buí services but claiming One Parent Family Payment is that she is 31 years old, from Coolock, claiming OPFP for five years, and has one child under six years of age. She is unmarried and left school at about 16 to get a job. She can't get childcare for her child and she can't afford to pay for it. She is not getting maintenance from the father, is still living at home with her parents and she is not currently on a housing list.

Lone parents speak of their needs

Lone parents speak of requiring quality, accessible information services and personal support. Child care support, both places and financial support, figured in a major way amongst all respondents, both pre-school and after-school provision. Housing, education and training were listed as key needs amongst those surveyed and large numbers wish to return to education, training or employment, but are effectively unable to do so because their information, childcare, housing, education and training needs are just not being met.

While many lone parents are in touch with local agencies, a surprising number are not in touch with any support agency or group. Methods of outreach to lone parents must be improved to gain greater access to them, in ways that recognise the particular situation of those parenting alone.

A huge hunger for educational and training courses exists and the barriers listed above are the same ones which keep lone parents from completing formal education or upskilling for a value-added job in the paid work force.

Those claiming OPFP do so as a means of survival. Peer support groups and confidence building activities are much needed for lone parents, young and older, to support the economic and social inclusion of lone parents.

Service providers speak of lone parents' needs

Lack of statistical data amongst most service providers makes it difficult for those agencies to determine the needs of lone parents, except anecdotally. Most agencies know that a large number of their existing clients are lone parents, but they have no specific targeting of information or services for lone parents as a target group. Sharing of informed information on lone parents with specialist agencies for lone parents would be seen as helpful to these general agencies.

While most agencies were able to correctly identify priority issues for lone parents due to the large number of lone parents in their client profile, some suggested that lone parents required specialist support, such as advocacy with state services or legal situations.

Agencies identified key barriers preventing lone parents accessing the supports they require. Again, childcare, housing, fear, poverty and confidence all figured clearly. Agencies were also able to list some 26 policy areas requiring change to improve the situation of lone parents.

Agencies raised issues of health concerns for lone parents dealing with stress of their lives. They also flagged the absence of lone parents in new communities accessing services and the need to plan for this for the future.

Factors affecting increase of OPFP claimants

While it is impossible to determine precisely why we have seen an increase in the catchment area of over 1400 OPFP claimants since 1999, a number of issues have been highlighted in the research that may help to throw some light on the reason for the increase. Firstly, the number of lone parents throughout Ireland has increased, thus one would expect to find a corresponding increase in the local area. The fact that this increase is 31% is perhaps explained by the combination of housing immobility - inability of lone parents to move out of parents home and find housing due to housing shortage. Poverty levels amongst lone parents are well established and exacerbated by low maintenance levels and

persistent barriers remaining to access to employment and training, all of these factors lead to lone parents having no choice but to claim OPFP, thus adding to the numbers on the local social welfare figures.

Recommendations

National Policy Recommendations:

The following recommendations are aimed at national policy makers and describe changes required at national level to improve the situation of lone parents across Ireland.

- **Childcare** cost and availability issues must be addressed immediately by the State if lone parents are to find social inclusion and economic independence.
- **Housing** provision for lone parents must address housing list allocation, social housing allocation and affordability, if lone parents are to have the security of tenure so fundamental to all individuals and families in the State.
- **Education and training** access is the route to economic independence and a means of breaking the poverty cycle. Early school leaving patterns must be addressed – providing access to return to education is vital; ensuring young girls don't leave school early is also vital. Early school leaving prevention programmes aimed at young women must be developed and supported by the State.
- **Programmes** to support confidence-building of lone parents are a vital stepping stone to help lone parents rebuild their confidence in themselves and their ability to support their families into the future.
- Individualisation of **social welfare** and **taxation** must move forward in the State so that all individuals are entitled to support in their own right and the dependency model currently prevailing ends.
- Recent **rent allowance** changes must be reversed and replaced by measures to promote security of tenure and end exploitation of lone parent families.
- A programme to promote a model of **positive attitudes** towards lone parents should be supported

by the State to work against the negative stereotypes which are damaging to lone parents.

Local Service Provision Recommendations

The recommendations made below are aimed at local service providers generally. That is whether statutory, non-statutory or voluntary agencies who are providing services to lone parents. They are changes that should take place at the local level to improve the situation of lone parents locally.

Local service providers should:

- Make concerted efforts to support increased and improved provision of **childcare** in the local area.
- Seek to provide targeted **lone parent information programmes**, even when their key target group may not be lone parents per se. Many information providers found that lone parents made up a large number of their client base.
- Provide **training and education** programmes which specifically meet the demand of lone parents to return to training and education. In particular, providers might examine the precise supports required by lone parents to support participation.
- **Advertise** their services and supports as being of use or interest to lone parents, rather than expect lone parents to see themselves in amongst the general publicity materials provided by such agencies.
- Lone parents want local providers to hold **information desks** in public places to allow for greater access by lone parents.
- Collect and **collate data** which tracks lone parents take-up of services. This would be of great use in determining just what services are, and are not, being used by lone parents.
- When designing and disseminating information materials on their services, lone parents want to receive informed **information** regarding lone parents' situation.

- Rather than having general advertising campaign, service providers are asked to **target lone parents** for take up of services.

Recommendations to the Northside Partnership

The Northside Partnership should:

- Seek to improve its profile among lone parents by **targeting** them with particular programmes and activities that are marketed as being suitable for lone parents.
- Host more **information workshops** to attract lone parents specifically, at times and in places where lone parents are to be found.
- Continue to support improved **childcare** provision locally, through its work with the Northside Childcare Bureau and support for other childcare facilities throughout the community.
- Continue to support community campaigns to **stop welfare cuts** that are disproportionately affecting lone parents.

Recommendations to Doras Bui

Doras Bui should:

- Develop its services so that it can act as a '**one stop shop**' for lone parent support needs.
- **Collate profile statistics** of lone parents and circulate the data to all other local service providers, thus ensuring that data from non-lone parent specific agencies would be less anecdotal.
- Seek to find the means to **advertise their services** to lone parents in a wider manner across the community.
- Seek to provide more **childcare** services for lone parents in the community.

- Seek to develop more support **programmes for young lone mothers** in particular who are in need of intensive supports.
- Work in a preventative and supportive manner with local schools and education services to ensure that young girls who get pregnant or have babies stay in school and **avoid early school leaving**.
- Continue to develop and provide **parenting programmes** that support those parenting alone to develop their parenting skills in a manner that recognises the concerns of those parenting alone.
- Recognising the huge demand for return to **education and training** amongst lone parents, to support lone parents to access courses and education across the community.
- Find ways to get **information** on the supports and services available in Doras Bui to lone parents as directly and succinctly as possible.
- Hold **coffee mornings** to break down isolation amongst lone parents.
- To combat the many negative stereotyped images of lone parents in the community, to support a **positive campaign** on lone parenting which would show the positive role models that many lone parents are.

Grainne Healy

Chapter 2

Introduction: Doras Buí and Northside Partnership

Doras Buí, a parents alone resource centre, was founded in 1986 as part of the EU Second Programme to Combat Poverty. Formerly known as PARC, the Parents Alone Resource Centre, Doras Buí has been part of the Community Development Programme since 1990.

The first locally-based resource centre for lone parents and their children, Doras Buí has grown from a modest base in two maisonettes provided by Dublin City Council to a purpose built centre, the result of fundraising over many years. The centre in Coolock was opened in 1992 by the then President of Ireland, Mary Robinson.

Over the years Doras Buí has implemented innovative programmes based on a philosophy that encourages economic independence, self-confidence and the development of skills. Through the use of participative community development methodologies, many parents using the centre have learned new skills, developed their talents and made positive changes for themselves and their children.

From the work of Doras Buí with families, the centre also campaigns for policy and attitudinal change to support family diversity and they have successfully made impacts on evolving government policy relating to one-parent families.

Northside Partnership¹ was established in 1991 and has had a very clear and strategic focus on moving the unemployed, specifically the long-term unemployed, from welfare to work.

During the last 10 years the Northside Partnership, operating in Ireland's most disadvantaged communities, has been tackling issues surrounding the problems of unemployment and long-term unemployment. The company has developed excellent working relationships with organisations in the private, public, state and community/voluntary sectors and in particular FÁS. It was through this co-operation and collaboration with its strategic partners that dramatic successes were achieved,

with long-term unemployment reducing by 51% within the catchment area as against 29% nationally, in the three-year period 1997-2000.

The Partnership concentrates its efforts on individuals, families and groups who are not fully included in the social and economic life of the area, specifically:

- Long term unemployed men and women (with a specific emphasis on older men)
- Lone parents
- Those with low levels of education, including those with literacy needs
- Young people at risk of long-term unemployment, including early school leavers
- Women returners
- The Travelling community
- Ex-drug misusers
- Prisoners/ex-prisoners and offenders/ex-offenders
- People with disabilities
- Refugees
- Homeless people

In most cases those targeted for support reside in Nine 'priority district areas' within the Partnership's catchment area. These areas are:

1. Darndale/Belcamp
2. Kilmore
3. Harmonstown/Edenmore
4. Donnycarney
5. Bonnybrook
6. Donaghmede
7. Moatview
8. Kilbarrack
9. Baldoyle

These areas have suffered from continuous deprivation despite the recent economic growth. Unemployment, specifically long-term unemployment, remains high with early school leaving, drug addiction and criminal activity normal everyday events in the lives of many residents.

¹ Annual Report Northside Partnership Ltd, Dublin, 2003

Most Disadvantaged National District Electoral Divisions (DEDs)²

Within the area targeted by Doras Buí/Northside Partnership there are:

- 5,885 people registered unemployed, of whom 40.4% are Long Term Unemployed.
- 4,860 people in receipt of Lone Parent Allowance.
- Approx. 4,000 drug users.
- 20% of prisoners in Mountjoy have addresses in the Partnership area; postal districts 5, 13, and 17 accounting for approx. 160 people. This figure does not include those people on probation or inmates from other prisons in the State.
- 2,626 people in receipt of disability payment.
- 591 travellers.

Local context of research

The catchment area of Doras Buí and Northside Partnership has a population of 106,000 people. It has a wide geographic spread, with some of the country's most affluent areas (Sutton) alongside those of greatest disadvantage (Darndale).³

The statistics from the 1998 GAMMA⁴ study identified 342 of the 3,430 National District Electoral Divisions (DEDs) classified as 'most disadvantaged 10%' with 54 of these 343 DEDs in the Dublin region.

Details	Number
Top 10% nationally	343 DEDs (Population 306,869)
Dublin Region	54 DEDs
Northside Partnership/ Doras Buí area	5 DEDs (Population circa.14,000)

Within the catchment area, eight of the most disadvantaged districts are to be found. These are areas which, according to the Hasse Index of Relative Affluence, can be designated most disadvantaged, some 30% below the acceptable base line. These districts include: Donnycarney, Kilmore C (including Kilbarrack), Moatview, Darndale/Belcamp, Bonnybrook, Edenmore, Kilmore B and Harmonstown.

Some of the DEDs have concentrations of families headed by one parent, many of whom have no formal education or primary only. This experience inevitably leads to poverty and social exclusion.

Lone parents in Ireland

National & Local

There are many myths about one-parent families. Among them are that most of the pregnancies outside marriage are to teenage mothers. Another one is that women get pregnant to get a local authority house or to get an allowance. The reality is quite different as the statistics below show:

- In 2001 less than 5.5% of all births were to mothers under 20.
- Less than 16% of births outside marriage were to mothers under 20.
- There are 111,205 lone parents in Ireland, 34,000 in Dublin.⁵
- Over 29% of all one parent households are at risk of living in poverty.
- 16% of all children living below the 50% poverty line are part of a one-parent family.
- In 1997, 91% of lone parents were women.⁶

This research will also show that even in the relatively small sample of this survey, many of the myths propagated about lone parents do not stand up to scrutiny. The lone parents in this survey are all in receipt

² Gamma Study of National District Electoral Divisions, 1998

³ Ibid, 1.

⁴ Ibid Gamma. 1998

⁵ CSO Figures, 2003

⁶ Annual Report Doras Buí, Dublin, 2002

of OPFP, a payment introduced in January 1997. McCashin's 'Lone Mothers in Ireland'⁷ 1996, was a local study for Doras Buí, then called Parents Alone Resource Centre. In that study McCashin notes that small local studies can be useful in informing national policy if 'they define their boundaries, guard against over-interpretation of a necessarily selective sample ... And carefully graft their findings onto national trends.'

McCashin's study also shows some national figures for growth in lone parenthood in Ireland.⁸ The percentage of lone parent families (mothers and fathers) was rising, as a percentage of all families in Ireland in the 1980's and early 1990's – 1981 they were 7.1%, 1986 they were 8.6% and in 1991 lone parent families counted for 10.7 of all families in Ireland. Further figures collated by Loftus⁹ from the Census show that in 1996 lone parent households accounted for 11.2% of all households, this figure has risen to 11.7% in 2002.

While McCashin's study is now almost 10 years old, many of the recommendations arising from this local survey reflect the same recommendations made by McCashin in 1996. He notes that inadequate payments, poverty, childcare and housing are of key concern to lone parents – issues reflected in this local survey. He also goes on to show that 'a positive aspiration to work or return to work' was evident in the lone parents but that lack of childcare was a persistent barrier.

Loftus's¹⁰ more recent study shows that nationally, while one-parent households constituted less than one in 20 of the consistently poor households in 1994, this had increased to almost one in five by 2001.

She goes on to say that 'those in receipt of One Parent Family Payment, have the highest rate of consistent poverty among all social welfare recipients.' Loftus

maintains that 'over the past 10 years, lone parents have fallen further and further behind income trends for the rest of the population.'

Two further conclusions made by Loftus in her study which are relevant and will arise in this survey are – that welfare to work supports were designed for unemployed people and simply extended to lone parents without any adaptation to take account of the specific needs of one parent families. Secondly, she says, the 'absence of proper childcare supports prevents lone parents from remaining in or returning to education.'

Two other conclusions made by Loftus¹¹ regarding the national profile of lone parents which is reflected in this small local survey is regarding the number of children and age profile of the lone parent. Firstly, this survey supports Loftus' national profile of a lone parent as being a parent with one child (61.3%), a figure comparable to the local study of 50%+.

Secondly, while this local survey shows a lone parent's age profile as 31, the national figures, according to Loftus shows the vast majority of lone parents as being in their 20's (50%+), not teenagers, as the myth would have us believe.

In another recent publication by OPEN, Dr Jonathan Healy¹² makes the links between lone parents and poverty very clear in relation to fuel poverty. Healy says that while one in eight lone parents are male in Ireland, virtually all fuel poor lone parents are female, with lone parent families 2.4 times more likely to suffer fuel poverty than two parent families.

These findings can perhaps suggest reasons behind the poor health status of some lone parents who participated in this survey. Again Healy goes onto say, 'as lone parent

⁷ McCashin, Tony, *Lone Mothers in Ireland, a local study*. Oak Tree Press/Combat Poverty Agency. 1996

⁸ McCashin, *Ibid*, pp3

⁹ Loftus, Camille, *One Size Fits All? 1994-2004*, OPEN, May, 2004

¹⁰ Loftus, *ibid*

¹¹ Loftus, *Ibid*

¹² Healy, Jonathan. D. *Dr. Lone Parent Fuel Poverty in Ireland*. Environmental Institute UCD. May 2004

households, by definition, are households with children, and as children are more susceptible to cold-related illness, the result is that over a quarter are enduring fuel poverty and living in unsatisfactory thermal conditions, is cause for concern from a public-health perspective?

International

While the survey in this report is local and situated in Ireland, the situation of lone parents is not just an Irish issue, but figures also as an EU issue. In neighbouring UK, Spangle¹³, a UK-based lone parent organisation lists their priority issues for lone parents in UK. This list is remarkably similar to the issues emerging in this research. Briefly, they call for: paid parental leave for early years; affordable housing in safe areas; legal measures against loan sharks; quality of life on income supplement; investment in lone parent pre-employment programmes; affordable state provision of child care; parent friendly workplace; a working tax credit system that is accessible and well administrated; an efficient housing benefit system, and an increase in the minimum wage.

¹³ Spangle, Issue no.9, July, UK, 2003

Chapter 3

Rationale and Methodology for Research

Since mid-2003 Doras Buí and Northside Partnership have become aware of a rise in claimants of OPFP (One Parent Family Payment) from figures available from the Department of Social and Family Affairs. These figures¹⁴ indicate that in the four year period 1999-2003, the numbers claiming OPFP have risen from 3,334 to 4,860; an increase of some 1,426 claimants in that period.

Despite the economic growth in Ireland in the 1990's, this increase of over 31% of OPFP claimants in the local area is a serious development that requires examination and has implications for the resourcing, provision and development of supports and services to lone parents and their families nationally and in the catchment area.

The brief for this survey was to identify possible factors contributing to the rise in claimants of OPFP in the catchment area and to profile claimants *not* currently using services of Doras Buí. Secondly, the brief was to discover the support needs of those lone parents surveyed with a view to making recommendations to service providers in the catchment area regarding meeting the needs of lone parents, as expressed by this survey pool of lone parents.

Research Objectives

- To establish contact with lone parents in receipt of OPFP who are not currently availing of services of Doras Buí.
- To explore the factors contributing to the increase of lone parents in receipt of OPFP in the catchment area in recent years (1,426).
- To identify the support needs of lone parents.
- To make recommendations regarding supports and service provision for lone parents.
- To produce documentation that will influence strategic collaboration between Northside Partnership and Doras Buí to further meet the identified needs of lone parents.

Methodology

This qualitative research used a participative methodology to attract and gain the input of the research subjects – lone parents and local service providers.

The original methodology set out an approach that sought to glean the opinions and viewpoints of service providers, but most importantly to provide a platform for the lone parents surveyed to tell service providers who they are and what their needs may be.

Lone parent respondents

It was originally envisaged that a number of focus groups of lone parents would be held in Doras Buí and that existing databases from local organisations would yield the required sample interviewees – original target was 60. However, despite contact with local groups, it proved very difficult to identify and get in touch with lone parents who were not using the services of Doras Buí, despite the increase in the number of claimants of OPFP. Eventually, using creative methods to encourage participants to come forward, the staff of Doras Buí, Northside Partnership and the researcher managed to contact and interview 64 lone parents of the required target group.

Using a questionnaire (which was devised by and initially piloted with staff of Doras Buí) the 64 interviewees were asked questions regarding their circumstances, reasons for claiming OPFP and their support needs and requirements. The bulk of these interviews took place in the period January – March 2004.

The survey asked lone parents about age, number of children and their ages, marital status, address, length of time on OPFP, educational attainment, certification and reasons for leaving school, attitude to returning to education or employment and to list any barriers they

¹⁴ Quarterly figures on OPFP in local area compiled by Department of Social and Family Affairs. 2003

currently experienced regarding returning to education, training or employment.

The second part of the questionnaire gathered more specific information on details of current marital status and information on maintenance and child care requirements. It also attempted to ascertain information regarding associated situations which may have had a bearing on their claiming OPFP i.e. housing status, rent allowance situation, drug issues. The questionnaire also sought to discover the participants' interest in supports and services and to identify the types of training and courses of interest to them. Details of current child care needs were also asked for and a list of current services offered by Doras Buí were given and interest ascertained. Questions were then asked of the level of knowledge participants had of service provision for lone parents by Doras Buí and Northside Partnership and they were asked to suggest the most suitable means of contacting them with information on services and supports.

The last section dealt with any supports they were currently accessing and they were asked to prioritise a current support or service requirement which would make a difference to their life and explain why they were not currently accessing it. Lastly, barriers to local services and information were listed and a space for further comments was provided.

Service and support agencies

In the period prior to Christmas 2003, 15 local service providing agencies were contacted and asked to participate in the survey via a one to one interview. 12 agencies agreed and those interviews were completed, mostly at the premises of each agency, by December 31st 2003.

The interviews with agencies took the form of a one-hour structured interview. The researcher asked questions on the following areas: role or rank of person representing their agency and the services provided by them; any data they might have to enable a comparative profile by them of lone parents in 1999 and 2003; whether they had seen an increase in the number of lone

parents comparable with the increase of 31% recorded by the Department of Social and Family Affairs; to list their sense of what were the issues upon which lone parents were coming forward for support and their view of what were the key supports required by lone parents; and the key barriers preventing lone parents from accessing those supports and services.

They were also asked to identify any recent policy changes which they considered had had a negative impact on lone parents' lives, whether their agency had any plans to target supports and services specifically to lone parent clients, and finally, any other comments they wished to make were gathered.

Chapter 4

Findings from Lone Parents

A Profile of Lone Parents and a Summary of Findings

The summary profile emerging from the 64 lone parents who took part in the survey looks thus: The average age of respondents was 31.8 years (oldest 52, youngest 18). Respondents were female (by a huge majority i.e. 63:1), with addresses from all over the catchment area, but a large number from Coolock itself.

Over one quarter of respondents had been claiming OPFP for 5-10 years, while a further quarter have been claiming it for 2-5 years. Thus half of the respondents have been claiming OPFP between 2 and 10 years.

Over 50% have just one child, while almost another third (22) have just 2 children. 3 respondents had more than 5 children and only 1 lone parent had six children.

Ages of children range from under 1 year to over 20 years of age. 45 of the 68 children are of pre-school age (under 6) and only 15 were beyond final school leaving age (17).

The vast majority of lone parent respondents were unmarried - 49 out of 64. 10 of the 64 were married but separated, and only 3 divorced. Of the 10 separated, only 6 held a legal separation document.

The average school leaving age amongst the 64 respondents was 16.9 years. With one respondent having left school at 12 years of age, while another, the longest in school/education left at 20 years of age. Top reason for leaving school was the view that they 'were finished education' followed by 'to get work'. While almost one-third had finished leaving certificate, almost 50% (25 respondents) left school with only junior certificate or Intermediate certificate level. A large majority (39) would like to return to education or training, while a small number of participants had already returned (3).

Listing the barriers currently stopping them from accessing education or training, a large number stated that lack of child care was the major barrier to participation in education or training (21), while a

sizeable number said lack of money was a major barrier to access.

The vast majority of respondents are not in receipt of maintenance (41 out of 54), while of those who are (13) 5 get it as a result of court order and 8 get it on a voluntary basis from second parent. In both cases the amount per week was in the region of 30-40 euro.

Of the 64 respondents who were asked if child care was a problem for them, 53 said it was. 37 said it was an issue of cost, while 16 said it was availability. The issue of quality also arose and currently lone parents are paying between 5 euro an hour in a subsidised community child care centre up to 180 euro a week for full time care.

Despite an average age of 31, some 10% owned their own home, while one third were living at home with their parents, with slightly fewer (17) in local authority housing and a significant number (16) in private rented accommodation. The largest cohort are being accommodated not by local authority housing, but rather still at home with parents or in private rental accommodation. Only 14 respondents are on a housing list, of those the majority are on it for five years or more, while 24 stated that they were not on any housing list at all.

Key Issues Arising From Survey

Many of the issues articulated below are issues arising from a local experience and they have local contexts. However, many of the issues are decided at national policymaking level and recommendations arising are thus national policy level.

Age myths

The findings in this part of the research contribute somewhat to our understanding of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the issues facing lone parents today. There is no doubt that when negative media coverage about lone parents reaches the national papers and television screens it is the notion that lone parents are young teenage mums all getting a large

allowance and free houses from the local authority. As the national figures cited above in the introduction show, the vast majority of births outside marriage are not to teen mums. The fact that the average age in this random sample of OPFP claimants is 31.9 serves to debunk the teenage mum myth. Only 4 respondents were under 20 years of age in this survey and almost 50 of the 64 respondents were in their 20's and 30's.

Fig 1. Age

Under 20	20s	30s	40s	50s	Total
4	24	24	11	1	64

Female over representation

As national figures tell us the majority of those claiming OPFP are female, so too are the great majority of our respondents. Given the over representation of women as welfare recipients, women are also over represented as OPFP recipients. Nolan and Gannon (2002)¹⁵ provided clear evidence from 1994, 1997 and 2000 surveys that women are at higher risk of poverty than men.

Number of children to lone parents

Despite myths and media reports citing large numbers of children of one-parent families, this research shows that the vast majority of respondents have only one or two children. The survey also shows that those who are married but separated or divorced are more likely to have larger numbers of dependent children than the unmarried cohort, who make up by far the majority of those on OPFP.

Fig 2. Number of children

Number of children	No. of respondents
1 child	33 lone parents
2 children	22 lone parents
3 children	5 lone parents
4 children	4 lone parents
5 children	3 lone parents
6 children	1 lone parent

¹⁵ Nolan B., Gannon B., Layter R., Watson D., Whelan C.T., & Williams J. *Monitoring Poverty Trends in Ireland Results from Living In Ireland Surveys 1994, 1997, 2000* ESRI, Dublin 2000

Length of time as claimants

Despite the fact that some claimants are on OPFP for five to 10 years it would seem that length of time claiming is no indication of services or support uptake. It may also come as a surprise to the key agencies commissioning this research that so many of the respondents prior to being involved in the survey were unaware of either Doras Buí or Northside Partnership.

Fig 3. Length of time on OPFP

Time/situation	No. of respondents
Applying	2
Waiting	2
Less than 1 year	6
1-2 years	3
2-4 years	16
5-10 years	17
11-15 years	9
15-17 years	3
17-20 years	2
20 years +	2

(only 62 respondents gave this information)

Child care matters

The ages of children and the demand for pre-school and after school care places evident from this survey is a key indication of the huge gap in child care provision in the catchment area, despite an increase in provision and activity in this area in recent years. This gap must be filled to address both the availability and the affordability problems of all parents, but in this context of lone parents in particular. The type of provision is an issue with pre-school and after-school services equally in demand.

When asked to list what would actually resolve child care problems those surveyed said they would require that the child care be cheaper (14) and more available (8) while the third most common required solution was a matter of getting quality child care (3).

Interestingly, a number of respondents (7) stated that they did not pay anything for child care at present because they were getting it for free from their mother, sister, friend or they were paying a minimum amount. This reliance on free child care raises issues of quality, informal arrangements and highlights the way in which lone parents child care needs can often be met within the family, but this is not necessarily a matter of choice but of necessity due to lack of places and unaffordability.

Fig 4. Child care situation

Is your child care situation a problem due to:	
Cost?	Yes: 37
Availability?	Yes: 16

Fig 4.1. What would resolve your childcare issues?

Comment	No. of respondents
If it was cheaper	14
If it was available	8
If it was quality care	3
If it had information	1

Early school leavers

The links between early school leaving and poverty are well established. Respondents gave a variety of reasons when asked why they left school.

Fig 5. Reasons for leaving school were stated as:

Stated reason	No. of respondents
Was finished education	18
To get work	17
Just wanted to	8
Got pregnant and had to	5
To train	3
Was bored	2
Has a drug problem	2
Had to leave to do home care duties	2
Was expelled	2
Hated it/was bullied	3
Total:	64

The school level at which respondents left full time education is significant - eight left with only primary level education while only two out of 64 stated they had done third level education.

Fig 6. School leaving level

Level of school leaving	No. of respondents
Primary school	8
Junior/Inter Certificate	25
Leaving Certificate	17
Third Level	2

Only 52 respondents replied to this question.

Despite the early school levels there was a very high number of lone parents (65%) who said they wanted to return to education or training.

Access barriers

The data on barriers to accessing education, training and employment are clear and restated by most respondents. The top barriers were listed as child care (21), lack of money (11) and lack of confidence (4).

A number of respondents replied that they did not want to take up education, training or employment at present because they see their current role as being a carer (5).

Others said that key barriers for them included; literacy problems, drug problems, fear of schooling and an unwillingness to return due to a bad experience at school.

Fig 7. List barriers which stop you from returning to education or training?

Barrier/issues	No. of Respondents
Lack of child care	21
Lack of money	11
Lack of confidence	4
See my role as a full time carer	5
Literacy issues	1
Drug issues	1
Fear of school/education	1
Had bad experiences with teachers/school	1

Maintenance

The level of maintenance support declared was very low. Even in the few cases where maintenance was being paid (13) each respondent made the point that the payment, when it was made voluntarily or via court order, was irregular and unreliable. This lack of support by the other parent seems to be the rule for OPFP claimants rather than the exception. This leaves the lone parent in many cases totally reliant on the State for the support of her child.

Fig 8. Are you in receipt of maintenance?

Yes	13
No	41

(10 respondents did not answer this question)

If yes, is it

Court order?	5 of 13
Voluntary?	8 of 13
Weekly amount?	35-40 Euro

It is important to note here that regarding payment of maintenance, Treoir notes in its newsletter¹⁶ that if a parent is receiving maintenance from the other parent of the child, the parent may keep 50% of the maintenance while the OPFP is reduced by the other 50%. However, if the parent is paying maintenance directly to Social Welfare by direct debit, the other parent does not benefit from any part of the maintenance. This is obviously a disincentive to either seek or declare receipt of maintenance.

Fig 9. Marital status of respondents

Status	No. of lone parent respondents
Unmarried	49
Separated	10 Legally: 6
Divorced	3
Widow/er	1
Other: annulled	1
Total:	64

Housing facts

Despite the myth that media perpetuates that all lone parents are getting houses from the state, the figures in this survey show the reality of being a lone parent in Ireland in 2004 – most of the lone parents in this survey are actually still living at home in the home of their parents. The next largest cohort is in rented private accommodation towards which the state pays a set amount in support. A small number of respondents are in local authority accommodation and a large number are not on any local authority housing list.

The ESRI tells us that¹⁷ access to affordable housing has a disproportionate effect on women. Also that ‘the number of people on the local authorities waiting lists had grown by 23.5% since 1999. 85% of these households have income under 15,000 euro and with the average price of a new home at 200k, housing affordability accounts for

¹⁶ Treoir Newsletter, Nov/Dec 2001

¹⁷ Whelan CT et al Monitoring Poverty Trends in Ireland Results of 2001 Living in Ireland survey. ESRI, 2001

40% of the new households on the local authority waiting lists.

It goes on to say ‘women have lower incomes and pensions than men.’ ESRI has identified a 12% gender pay gap in the 2001 Living in Ireland survey. Households headed by ‘someone working full-time in the home (women mostly) by far the lowest income group.

Department of Environment and Local Government¹⁸ statistics tell us that 32% of households on the national housing list are single. 29% are lone parent-headed households.

Only 14 of our respondents were on the housing list for local authority accommodation and of these some had been waiting up to nine years, with many waiting five or more years. This issue of length of time on housing list obviously affects potential mobility of lone parents on OPFP.

Fig 10. Housing: What is your current housing situation?

Situation	No. of respondents
Living at home with parents	19
In private rented accom.	16
In local authority accom.	17
Own owned home	10
Other: Refuge	1
Social Housing	1

Are you on a housing list?

Yes	14	1 month - 9 years, many 5 years plus
No	24	

While it is hard to state categorically that lack of housing is the key reason why the numbers on OPFP in the local area are rising. It does seem appropriate to speculate that

¹⁸ Annual Statistics Bulletin 2002. Department of Environment and Local Government .

in the past there was more mobility for people wanting to move out of the area and out of the OPFP claimant figures in the catchment – perhaps to move to another area. However, the lack of housing opportunities and the high numbers of those living with parents is surely a contributing factor to the rise in numbers of OPFP claimants.

Key Issues Arising from Survey for Lone Parents

Cap on rent allowance

When asked if the recently introduced cap on rent allowance has affected them, a small number said it had and listed that they were now working more hours to get more money to pay the rent so they could have enough to survive on while others not in a position to work, stated that they simply could not afford it and feared getting into debt.

The INOU explained in its Bulletin¹⁹ that tenants who receive a rent supplement - one-third of those being in the private rented sector - get rent supplement payments which have now been capped at 2002 rates. Their view is that the effects of this will have impacts on the economically disadvantaged. They deplore it because it ignores the fact of the accommodation shortage, the rising cost of living, the difficult experiences of those on rent supplements with children of finding accommodation.

As of January 2004, rent supplements were capped so that recipients will have to make a bigger contribution to rent. The cap sets the contribution of the State at the level set in 1994. This is 10% the minimum social welfare payment.²⁰ The rent supplement will not be payable where the amount exceeds the appropriate maximum. FLAC²¹ recommend that measures such as those common in other EU member states should be introduced to promote security of tenure and protect tenants from exploitation and insecurity.

¹⁹ INOU Bulletin, January 2003

²⁰ Treoir, Newsletter, Oct/Nov/Dec, 2002

²¹ FLAC News, Vol 13, No.1 Jan-Mar 2003

Drug issues

While it was expected that this question would throw up a picture of those in areas with drug habit issues related to unprescribed drug habits and rehabilitation, respondents instead listed prescribed drugs for stress and depression as key drug issues arising from their situation and circumstances.

Poor health and stress were listed as resulting from the burden of poverty and social exclusion of being a lone parent or trying to parent alone in what seemed like an unsupported way (financially and emotionally). Agencies supporting lone parents need to take this into account as the poor living conditions such as poor housing and fuel poverty mean that lone parents are stressed and may have health issues that lead to reliance on medications. Management of that stress is an issue for service providers locally while recognition of the need to support such stress management work is vital for funders.

A forthcoming report by the Equality Authority²² on carers notes how 'high levels of stress experienced by carers is common. One study noted that almost one-third of carers had a level of psychological distress that put them at risk of clinically diagnosable anxiety/depression. While this report focuses on carers' work, not specifically child care, the fact is that women do the vast majority of care and are hugely over-represented as carers. Lone parent women are no different in this regard, they carry care responsibilities along with sole responsibility for their own children.

Has lone parenting become more socially acceptable?

The vast majority of respondents rejected that the social stigma regarding lone parents was a thing of the past. Some comments such as 'People look down on me as a lone parent' and 'I wish I didn't have to claim OPFP, but I do to survive.' And 'it's just not true that lone parenting has become more socially acceptable' All these comments reject most strongly the idea that it is 'easy' or socially

acceptable to be a lone parent in Ireland in 2004. The extent of this sense of disapproval by society at large must contribute to the sense of isolation and social stigma. This must heighten the need for agencies to reach out and provide supports to lone parents and attempt to support their social inclusion via social and economic means.

Summary of Services and Supports of interest to Lone Parents

Information services

By far the highest expression of interest in the current list of services at Doras Buí was for Child care, followed by information on Local Employment Services and then the range of information services and personal support.

Family law, maintenance, guardianship etc were also favoured, with form-filling and housing information still registering strong interest (28 and 23 expressions of interest respectively). Child counselling and form-filling scored 22 while arts scored 30. All current supports and services were marked as of interest to respondents.

Fig 11. Interest of lone parents in services currently provided by Doras Buí

Current services of Doras Buí	
Drop in - information on Housing:	28
- information on S. Welfare:	47
- Form filling:	23
Personal support:	38
Family law matters:	31
Maintenance etc:	30
Child care:	51
Child counselling:	22
LESN:	44
Arts:	30

²²Equality Of Access for Carers to services, WRC, EqualityAuthority, forthcoming

Training

Computers, parenting and child care training were the top three most requested courses or programmes by respondents. These respondents are not registered with Doras Bui and for the most part do not know what services, courses or programmes are operating for lone parents there.

Child care needs

The largest number of respondents (31) said that if they could have their child care needs met to their satisfaction they would pursue employment, while education and training also scored highly. Of 51 respondents, the child care demands they had were for pre-school and after-school.

Some 14 respondents said their child care needs were not being met at all currently, while 10 listed private care and 17 family care – the lowest provision is from community at 6. This gap in provision at community level for those seeking to access child care to return to education or training or employment is a most serious one.

Fig 12. Child care

If your child care needs were being met, what would you like to be free to do?

12.1 To do?	Numbers
Training	20
Education	25
Get work	31

Some respondents ticked more than one option

Fig 12.2. When asked whether their needs were for pre-school or after school

Pre school child care required	25
After School child care required	26

Fig 12.3. How are your child care needs being met currently?

How?	No. of respondents
Privately	10
Community	6
Family	17
Not at all	14

Northside Partnership's profile

Knowledge of Northside Partnership's supports and services to lone parents was not widespread. Over 52% of respondents were aware of the support role played by Northside Partnership to lone parents (35), while 28 respondents said they were unaware of such supports and services.

When asked to list what such supports and services might look like from their perspective as lone parents they listed a desire for coffee mornings (27); an opportunity to meet with information providers on services; and also as opportunities to meet other lone parents. Further suggestions included: parenting programmes; lone parent support groups, including young lone parent support groups; and workshops on various issues including 'understanding my entitlements and rights'.

Fig 13. Are you aware the The Northside Partnership provides services to lone parents?

Yes	35
No	28

Fig 14. Can you suggest other supports or services that might be provided for lone parents?

Suggestions	No. of respondents
Coffee mornings	27
Parenting	4
Young lone parents	1
Lone parent support group	1
How the system works	2
Personal development	1
MABS	1
Various workshops	1

Other agencies with which lone parents are connected into for support

The other agencies listed can be seen in the table below, it is notable that there is a great spread of agencies, with no one agency getting a huge share of lone parent interest. It would seem that Doras Búí is the only lone parent specific local agency.

Fig 15. What organisations, if any, are you in contact with for support? (not Doras Búí or Northside Partnership)

Other organisation/group	No. of respondents
Sonas Housing	4
FÁS	2
LESN	4
Rotunda Hospital Social Welfare Dept	1
Breast Feeding support groups	1
Community Mothers Group	1
Community Welfare Office	4
Northside Counselling	4
KCCP	2
Clyde Mór family Centre	1
Family Mediation service, Earlsfort Tce	1
Darndale Civic Centre	1
Target Adult Education	2
Local Citizens' Information Centre	2
Youthreach	3
Aoibhneas Refuge	1
Contact Point	1
Law Centre	1

Barriers to accessing services

The top barrier was not knowing that services exist or where they can be contacted (22). This barrier was by far the most frequently listed, with 'inadequate child care' coming second. Lack of time and lack of child-friendly work or training situations also act as barriers for lone parents in accessing services. It is a clear message to service and support providers that those who are not

accessing the services and supports for lone parents are not doing so, primarily because lone parents do not know about their existence.

Fig 16. What are the key barriers that prevent you from accessing services or supports?

Barriers to access of services	No. of Respondents
I did not know about them	22
Have not got adequate childcare	7
Am embarrassed to seek help	2
Have emotional trauma	1
Am doing my caring work at home	1
I have no time to go looking	3
Do not have child friendly work/training	4
Personal issues stop me	1
Am on drugs	1
Had bad experience with CWO	1
I am unable to read or write	1
Do not have any money to pay	1
Too proud	1
Am working in mornings	1
Lack confidence	2

When asked which support would make greatest impact on the quality of their lives the largest response was – childcare (13). When asked why they were not currently accessing this support, the first reason was lack of knowledge on where to get it, followed by lack of money to pay for it.

Fig 17. What one support or service would make a difference to improve your life now?

Support to make a difference	No. of Respondents
Childcare	13
Legal aid	3
Counselling	5
Personal/emotional support	4
Get out of the house	2
Creative activity	2
Training	2
Literacy support	1

Parenting course	1
Counselling for children	2
Housing	2

Associated cuts in child care support by the State have impacted on lone parents. Treoir²³ point out that announced cuts in VTOS and Youthreach child care supports and budgets, to the level of 37% in the VEC has had severe impact on lone parents, as in these programmes one out of every five participants is an unmarried parent. It seems extraordinary that the states stated policy of wanting progression and training for lone parents, is undermining its own policy by making such child care budget cuts.

The EU employment guidelines published in April 2003 describe the priority actions for gender mainstreaming in employment policy. EAPN describes how ‘the new 10 commandments of the guidelines should include tackling the disadvantage experienced by women in accessing training and employment opportunities ... And should address barriers in the social protection systems in supporting societal responsibility for care and tackling issues of poverty and exclusion.’

Level of accessing supports locally

Only 30 respondents stated that they had tried to access support or services in the local area in the past. While 22 respondents had never sought support or services before this. This is a very high number of respondents to have never before sought support as lone parents locally. These are perhaps the key cohort of the 1,426 new OPFP claimants whom Doras Buí and Northside Partnership have not seen coming to avail of their supports and services during the rise in the number of claimants 1999-2003.

Fig 18. Have you tried to avail of any services or supports locally in the past?

Yes	30
No	22

²³ Treoir Newsletter, July/August, 2003

Fig 19. Can you suggest ways in which Doras Buí and Northside Partnership could better access lone parents in need of support and services?

Suggestions

Use advertisements	Get more referrals from Dublin City Council
Use leaflets	Information in health centres
Do more outreach	Desks in shopping centres
Put ads in schools, churches, banks	Fundraising days
Use NEAR FM radio station	Phone clients
Posters	Do leaflet drops
Coffee mornings	
Get more referrals from Social Welfare	
Produce more literature about services	
Have open days	

It is interesting to note that many respondents have been to other agencies or organisations and the list of local agencies that have provided supports and services is impressive. Respondents make a number of suggestions to Doras Buí and Northside Partnership regarding making contact with them. The list includes: better use of advertisements; coffee mornings; more outreach; using local radio more; using posters; getting more referrals from agencies like Dublin City Council or Community Welfare officers; holding fundraising days; having desks in shopping centres and at health centres; doing leaflet drops to people’s homes, and also calling clients directly.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (56) said they would like to hear more about the services and supports of Doras Buí and Northside Partnership in the future and the preferred method of contact was by letter in the post (51), or leaflet (29), or telephone (17). It is interesting to note that assumptions cannot be made that ‘everyone has email’. It is quite clear that only three out of 64 respondents asked to be emailed information on supports and services for lone parents.

Comments from lone parents arising from involvement in the research

'I want to see more lobbying for child care to be affordable and accessible for all parents, but especially for those parenting alone.'

'It's vital to have organisations raising awareness about lone parenting issues.'

'I found the one to one at Doras Buí today very helpful.'

'I feel the health services have let me down as a lone parent.'

'It can be difficult at times, being a lone parent.'

'Services to lone parents need to be advertised more.'

'I'm so glad to come across Doras Buí and its services through responding to the advertisement for this research.'

'Would love a singing and drama group just to break the isolation of being a lone parent.'

'I received information on FIS as a result of answering this ad.'

'I disagree with lone parents who are co-habiting and in receipt of OPFP.'

'I am enjoying the Northside Partnership's Tesco programme and hope to get a job from it.'

'I would like to see men and women's groups set up for lone parents to share ideas and problems.'

'The lone parent payment is just not enough.'

'Lone parents have lost confidence and are depressed, we're not always able to reach out to services, sometimes they have to come to us.'

'The lack of awareness of existing services for lone parents is major issue.'

Chapter 5

Findings of service providing agencies

The one to one structured interviews with agencies and organisations in the local catchment area were all conducted with senior figures from those bodies, usually co-ordinators of services or those with responsibility for service delivery.

The agencies ranged from national organisations and state departments with local offices in the catchment, to local organisations providing services locally to all, not just to lone parents.²⁴

Service providers

The type of services being provided included:

Fig A. Services provided

Welfare rights and entitlements	Special CE
Housing rights information	Local Employment Services
CWO	Counselling
Education	Reading and Writing
CV seeking	Rehabilitation and drug treatment
Money Advice Bureau	Child Care services
Family Law and advice	Education and drug awareness
Employment law	Social welfare information
Training programmes	General information
CE/JI support	FIS information

None of the agencies provide specific services to lone parents, though some of the agencies agree that the majority of their clients are lone parents.

Lone parent data

It was very difficult to obtain data from local service providers on their lone parent clients. While OPEN has national data, many of the local agencies had only recently started to collect data in a systematic and computerised manner, others had not had lone parents as a field in their data collection and so were unable to show statistically that they dealt with large numbers of lone parents, though anecdotally, they were sure this was the case.

In attempting to find local data to explain the leap in numbers of lone parents on OPFP in the area according to figures from Department of Social Welfare, it was only anecdotally supported by the agencies. The Department figures are that in 1999 there were 3,334 OPFP claimants in the catchment area, and in 2003 this figure was 4,866 claimants; a 31% increase locally.

1999 profile vs. 2003

Despite the absence of data on numbers of lone parents using services now and in 1999, agencies all felt that they were dealing with more lone parents now than in 1999. They also described lone parent clients in 1999 as mostly married women who had separated or were going through marriage break down, while current lone parents were younger, unmarried mostly and not aware of their rights and entitlements. This age and marital status perception is somewhat upheld by the profile established in Chapter 4.

In summarising the view of agencies regarding the anecdotal profile of lone parents in 2003, many felt that lone parents today were coming with more inquires and many more seemed separated. It is interesting to note

²⁴ list of agencies includes: Northside Centre for the Unemployed, One Parent Exchange and Network (OPEN), Money Advice Bureau (MABS), Northside Community Law Centre, Darndale/Belcamp Drug Awareness, Northside Community Employment Network Support Services, Target, Dublin North-East Drugs Task Force, Department of Social and Family Affairs, Northside Citizens Information Centre,

that according to the data on lone parents in this research, there are a high number of unmarried lone parents, but the average age is 31 years, with very few under 20 years of age, and a very small number are separated.

Some specialist agencies dealing with drug and rehabilitation matters have seen development of greater social exclusion and poverty amongst lone parents in their client base. The development of lone parents getting involved in prostitution to feed drug habits and using methadone and cocaine were acknowledged as serious and dangerous developments.

Many agencies said that in their view, lone parents were younger now than five years ago, and, had more children today than in previous years. Yet the data in this research shows that the vast majority of unmarried lone parents have one or two children, while it is the separated, divorced lone parents who have four or more children and even then the numbers here are very low.

Some agencies speak of lone parents being a hard to reach client group with little confidence and few life skills. This would be reflected in the comments regarding the need for personal support and confidence skills from lone parents themselves, also the average school leaving age of 16 would point to a low educational attainment which is so often allied to low levels of confidence.

There is a conflict in the comments made by some of the agencies, some say that their lone parent client group today are younger, others say they are older. Some say that they are more confident others say less so. There is no doubt that in the absence of statistics it is very hard to get a clear picture of the profile agencies have of their lone parent client base. This in turn makes it difficult to see how useful or suitable the services offered by these agencies are to lone parents. Perhaps if Doras Buí, which profile statistics of lone parents, could circulate relevant information to all local service providers, the data from agencies would be less anecdotal.

More lone parents now than in 1999?

Of the 11 agencies which participated in the research all, except two, said they had seen an increase in lone parent clients in recent years. Those who had not seen an increase said they always had a high number anyway. Some agencies spoke anecdotally of having more than 50% of their regular client group as lone parents.

MABS²⁵, who do keep clear records of lone parents in their client records, show that in 2002 they had 130 clients of whom 65 were lone parents, 26 married and 39 single (MABS annual report 2002). The MABS catchment area is the same as that of Northside Partnership and Doras Buí. Of their new clients in 2002, 76% were women and the gender breakdown and profile of lone parents shows this as almost half of their client base. Despite this high percentage of clients as lone parents, MABS does not provide or advertise any special services for lone parents specifically.

The Citizen's Information Centre²⁶ spoke of how they could see that they had a 30% increase in callers and that many of those would be repeat clients. Lone parents come to them for a variety of reasons and call back again when they have a successful experience with them.

It would be of use to lone parents using these local services if service providers informed themselves of lone parents profile and needs. In particular, links with Doras Buí for this information might enable these generalist service providers to better know that they are meeting the needs of lone parents adequately.

²⁵ MABS Dublin North-East MABS Annual Report, 2002

²⁶ In interview, December, 2003

Lone parent issues, according to agencies

The following list of issues were presented to agencies and they were asked how important they thought these were for the lone parents who used their services.

Fig B. Issues of importance for lone parents

	scale ranking
Divorce/separation	5
Child care	5
Housing	5
Rent allowance issues	4
Drug/alcohol issues	2
Maintenance	4
Education	3
CE/JI	4
Job seeking	4
Confidence issues	3

(1=not important 5=very important)

The issues which agencies think are of importance for lone parents are those which lone parents themselves have highlighted in this research. Divorce does not seem to be a high priority according to agencies and amongst lone parents low levels of divorce are evident (Fig 9).

Separation is recorded by agencies as of slightly higher interest, again reflecting the slightly higher number of those lone parents in this research who are separated (Fig 9).

Child care and housing are the two priority issues for lone parents, according to agencies. This certainly reflects the priorities as stated by lone parents themselves (Fig. 21.1, 12.2, 12.3). Child care issues come out as a top priority in the survey with lone parents themselves and here with the agencies.

Maintenance is seen as an issue of interest for lone parents and this is despite the low levels of payment and irregularity of it, even when underscored by court order (Fig.8.1). It is an issue upon which lone parents seek support and information.

The agencies have put rent allowance issues higher than lone parents do themselves. It is possible that this is due to the agencies being aware of forthcoming fall out from rent allowance changes which lone parents themselves may not as yet be experiencing.

Lone parents exhibit a strong interest in employment and supported employment according to agencies. This is affirmed by lone parents themselves who express interest in training, education and employment (Fig. 11, 12). The link between this interest and the barrier of lack of child care provision is very obvious and it is made both by the agencies and lone parents very strongly.

Fig. C Key supports required by lone parents, according to agencies

Child care	Flexible times for courses and training
Self-worth and development	Transport supports
Any inclusion programme	Programme of stepped dependency on state as children grow
Family peer support	Family income support information
Advocacy with state agencies	Rent allowance support
Elder care supports	
Housing	
Co-ordination of all lone parent supports	
CE places	
Access to information and courses	

The above table shows the list of supports which agencies consider lone parent require. There are very clear similarities between this list and the list given by lone parents in Fig. 11, 12, 14, 17) Child care, housing, information and personal support are in the top four of both sets of respondents.

Fig D. Key barriers that prevent lone parents accessing supports for themselves and their children.

- Means testing of allowances/earnings pushes lone parents into low paid, unskilled poverty traps

- Rent allowance regulations push lone parents into poor accommodation and poverty trap

- Childcare – its lack of availability, affordability and opening hours of crèches are barriers

- Fear of being negatively labelled ‘one parent family’

- Lack of knowledge and information on what is available to them in plain jargon and in one place

- Lack of family support and isolation

- Lack of support with agencies i.e. no self advocacy group

- Lack of progression paths via CE

- Poverty and debt

- Rent allowance and medical card recipients causes lack of transparency about co-habitation – need to introduce individualisation of social welfare to solve this

- Self confidence gaps

- Isolation and actual exclusion as a result of stereotypes

- Lack of co-ordination of lone parent specific information between the general information providers locally

- Grandparents often play big role and they require support

- Low earning and low earnings potential means that lone parents are trapped into the rent allowance, child care, medical card support system from which they dare not escape

As with Figs. 7, 16, 17, the issues identified for lone parents as key barriers reflect the issues identified by lone parents themselves. Child care figures largely once again and isolation and poverty traps are also described by the agencies. There is also self criticism of the lack of a one-stop-shop for lone parent information or at least co-ordination between information providers on lone parent specific information.

Policy changes and lone parents

The agencies were able to list over 26 specific policy provisions which either work against lone parents seeking to become independent and self-reliant or are actively causing fear and worry amongst the lone parent community.

The list of 26 policy areas is followed by the discussion on the top three policy issues of concern, as agencies see them.

Fig E. Policy areas of concern to lone parents

Supplementary rent allowance changes (31 January 2004)*	Government not delivering on its social housing commitment
Lowering of age of eligibility for lone parents to access CE schemes (25+)	Not enough earnings threshold over years for medical card holders
Amendment of housing points list (no more medical points)*	Earnings disregard set in 1997, unchanged and not linked to inflation
Drug refund scheme (increase in ceiling twice in last 12 months)	Rent allowance figure set since 1994*
Cuts in child care provision*	Back to school allowance refused to women over 50
FAS CTW Child care budgets cut*	Fears generated when proposal to make CE full time was mooted
Lone Parent title – awful misnomer, many feels it marginalizes further	Social economy cuts
Many ‘90’s developments increased dependency of lone parent on state, reversal now	Medical service cut backs
Various poverty trap payments very difficult to move off*	Expiration of the ADM child care grants

Number of young lone parents leaving school early with no qualifications, confidence, skills or progression hopes	Housing supply and affordability*
Resistance by state to individualisation of social welfare rights	Increased demands on social and local housing authorities*
Cuts in CE/JI	Poor security of tenure in private rental sector – market led approach of government is failing*
Housing policy works against lone parents caught in family of origin trap*	Lack of realistic supports to lone parent progression*

*(Issues mentioned by lone parents themselves are marked as *)*

Top three are: Government not delivering on its social housing commitment; access and affordability issues of child care; early school leaving lone parents. While lone parents did not articulate these issues as policy matters, they do reflect the problems and barriers stated by lone parents throughout this research.

How can agencies support lone parents more effectively?

The research shows that lone parents do try to access supports through local general agencies. Despite this and the high number of lone parent clients already using services of these agencies, few of the agencies have any plans to target or provide lone parent specific information or services. Some agencies are developing services which they know are in demand by lone parents such as child care and counselling, but not then targeting them for lone parent take up specifically.

Most of the agencies questioned intend to continue to provide their current service list and know that they are, by accident rather than design, attracting lone parents as part of the wide net they cast to attract clients in general.

Issues of concern raised by agencies

Invisibility of some lone parents

While this research had to focus on those lone parents on OPFP, many agencies raised the matter of the number of 'hidden' lone parents who are on other payments i.e. disability. One centre showed how of the 37 lone parents on their books, eight were on disability and not OPFP.

There was also the discussion about the needs of lone parents who are not on any social welfare payment but are independently supporting their families without social welfare support. Issues of subsidised child care and family supports were mentioned by agencies.

Housing issues, young and old

Another agency noted that there are young lone parents who are living at home and not claiming OPFP because they do not know they are entitled to it, regardless of the fact that they live at home. The family home issue is a big one and one that becomes very important as the child/ren get older.

The fact that the housing list is not a possibility for older lone parent women, or older men who end up alone, who may have had a local authority house at one time, is a homelessness time-bomb waiting to happen, according to some agencies.

The fact that asylum seekers do not appear as part of the data raises an issue regarding the local housing/accommodation stock. Is there an increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees being housed in private rental accommodation, putting yet further pressure on the stock for the local population? This may account for the slow movement of many lone parents into either local authority or private rental – perhaps a key in explaining why there is slow movement out of the area to other areas, thus causing a build up of numbers on OPFP with no trickle or outlet to other areas or progression as it is suspected happened in the past.

Rent allowance

The recent changes to regulations such as rent allowance where 'exceptions' can be made, is, according to some agencies, encourages distortion as people struggle to keep the maximum allowance towards rent or end up in debt.

Immigrants

The absence of immigrants and the so called 'new communities'²⁷ in this research and in the offices of agencies was discussed with some agencies. Despite the acknowledged fact that women from these communities can be seen clearly in the local shopping centres and health centres, they are not integrating into the service agencies at the local level and their issues are not coming through the agencies doors. It is therefore hard to ascertain where the lone parents from those communities are sourcing support, if at all.

Confidence

The issue of low self confidence amongst young women and young lone parents was noted and the need to build self confidence. Low confidence levels were seen by some as a root cause in crisis pregnancy and lone parenthood in certain cases. The need to build confidence and support for young lone parent women was also noted.

Poverty and early school leaving

The need to break the cycle of poverty and early school leaving was also spoken about with suggestions regarding stay in school programmes for young pregnant women.

Peer advocacy

The need for lone parents to develop peer advocacy services so that lone parents can be accompanied to state services with an informed advocate was suggested. This

mechanism would require training a certain number lone parents so that they could accompany others to service providers and contribute to a higher level of satisfaction with services amongst lone parents.

Health

Concerns were also expressed regarding the health and stress on mental health of lone parents coping with the pressures not just of modern family life, but with the added ones of poverty and exclusion. This reflects the surprising finding with lone parents themselves who cited problem issues with prescribed medication for trying to cope with stress and depression.

Data

The lack of hard data, apart from a few local agencies and the Department of Social and Family Affairs, makes it difficult to conduct wide and deep research in community settings like this one. A national study on lone parents with detailed data at DED level and amongst service providers would give policy makers a clearer view of who are lone parents, what are their needs and where are the service providers they require.

Attitudinal change

Finally it was said by many agencies that there was a real need to work in communities to challenge myths about lone parents and to build community. The themes requiring specific attention at present were named as racism, drugs, violence against women and lone parenting.

²⁷ Term being used by Irish Immigrant Council, Handbook, 2004

Chapter 6

Recommendations

National Policy Recommendations:

The following recommendations are aimed at national policy makers and describe changes required at national level to improve the situation of lone parents across Ireland.

- **Childcare** cost and availability issues must be addressed immediately by the State if lone parents are to find social inclusion and economic independence
- **Housing** provision for lone parents must address housing list allocation, social housing allocation and affordability if lone parents are to have the security of tenure so fundamental to all individuals and families in the State.
- **Education and training** access is the route to economic independence and a means of breaking the poverty cycle. Early school leaving patterns must be addressed – providing access to return to education if vital; ensuring young girls don't leave school early is also vital. Early school leaving prevention programmes aimed at young women must be developed and supported by the State.
- **Programmes** to support confidence building of lone parents are a vital stepping stone to help lone parents rebuild their confidence in themselves and their ability to support their families into the future.
- Individualisation of **social welfare** and taxation must move forward in the State so that all individuals are entitled to support in their own right and the dependency model currently prevailing ends.
- Recent **rent allowance** changes must be reversed and replaced by measures to promote security of tenure and end exploitation of lone parent families.
- A programme to promote a model of **positive attitudes** towards lone parents should be supported by the State to work against the negative stereotypes that are damaging to lone parents.

Local Service Provision Recommendations

The recommendations made below are aimed at local service providers generally. That is whether statutory, non-statutory or voluntary agencies who are providing services to lone parents. They are changes that should take place at the local level to improve the situation of lone parents locally.

Local service providers should:

- Make concerted efforts to support increased and improved provision of **childcare** in the local area.
- Seek to provide targeted **lone parent information programmes**, even when their key target group may not be lone parents per se. Many information providers found that lone parents made up a large number of their client base.
- Provide **training and education** programmes that specifically meet the demand of lone parents to return to training and education. In particular providers might examine the precise supports required by lone parents to support participation.
- **Advertise** their services and supports as being of use or interest to lone parents, rather than expect lone parents to see themselves in amongst the general publicity materials provided by such agencies.
- Lone parents want local providers to hold **information desks** in public places to allow for greater access by lone parents.
- Collect and **collate data** which tracks lone parents take up of services. This would be a great use in determining just what services are and are not being used by lone parents.
- When designing and disseminating information materials on their services, lone parents want to receive informed **information** regarding lone parents' situation.

- Rather than having general advertising campaign, service providers are asked to target lone parents for take up of services.

Recommendations to the Northside Partnership

The Northside Partnership should:

- Seek to improve its profile among lone parents **by targeting** them with particular programmes and activities that are marketed as being suitable for lone parents.
- Host more **information workshops** to attract lone parents specifically, at times and in places where lone parents are to be found.
- Continue to support improved **childcare** provision locally, through its work with the Northside Childcare Bureau and support for other childcare facilities throughout the community.
- Continue to support community campaigns to **stop welfare cuts** that are disproportionately affecting lone parents.

Recommendations to Doras Bui

Doras Bui should:

- Develop its services so that it can act as a '**one-stop-shop**' for lone parent support needs
- **Collate profile statistics** of lone parents and circulate the data to all other local service providers, thus ensuring that data from non lone parent specific agencies would be less anecdotal.
- Seek to find the means to **advertise** their services to lone parents in a wider manner across the community.
- Seek to provide more **childcare** services for lone parents in the community.

- Seek to develop more support **programmes for young lone mothers** in particular who are in need of intensive supports.
- Work in a preventative and supportive manner with local schools and education services to ensure that young girls who get pregnant or have babies stay in school and **avoid early school leaving**.
- Continue to develop and **provide parenting programmes** that support those parenting alone to develop their parenting skills in a manner that recognises that concerns of those parenting alone.
- Recognising the huge demand for return to **education and training** amongst lone parents, to support lone parents to access courses and education across the community.
- Find ways to get **information** on the supports and services available in Doras Bui to lone parents as directly and succinctly as possible.
- Hold **coffee mornings** to break down isolation amongst lone parents.
- To combat the many negative stereotyped images of lone parents in the community, to support a **positive campaign** on lone parenting which would show the positive role models that many lone parents are.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

From this survey of 64 lone parent participants the typical profile of a lone parent emerging is that she is claiming One Parent Family Payment, is 31 years old, from Coolock, claiming OPFP for five years, has one child under six years of age. She is unmarried and left school at about 16 to get a job. She can't get childcare for her child and she can't afford to pay for it. She is not getting maintenance from the father and she is still living at home with her parents and she is not currently on a housing list.

The research objectives have been achieved. The survey established contact with 64 lone parents in receipt of OPFP who are not currently availing of services of Doras Buí.

The factors contributing to the increase of lone parents in receipt of OPFP in the catchment area in recent years (1,426) were explored and a combination of housing shortages, poverty levels amongst women, rise in births to unmarried women, and cost of essential services such as child care, all contribute to the fact that lone parents must claim OPFP to survive.

The survey successfully identified the support needs of lone parents and they are summarised in Chapter 4 above. They are policy matters of national importance. The priority support needs are:

- Childcare.
- Housing.
- Information.
- Personal supports.

These were highlighted, while the barriers to accessing services, education, training or employment were listed as:

- Childcare.
- Lack of finance.
- Lack of confidence.
- Lack of information.

Having contacted and surveyed 12 local support agencies or bodies, there are clear recommendations in Chapter 5 regarding their supports and service provision at the local level to lone parents.

Finally, it is hoped that this document will be of use to Doras Buí and Northside Partnership as they continue their strategic collaboration to further meet the identified needs of lone parents and make a difference to the quality of life of the 4,860 lone parents on OPFP and their children and to the thousands of others who parent alone successfully and may require supports from time to time, as all families do.

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May 2004



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This research was funded by the Department of Social & Family Affairs