



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Minister Announces He Plans Proposals For Reform Legislation That Will Deliver New Opportunities For Lone Parents

***Brennan Convenes Special Forum To Advance Reforms For Over 80,000 Lone
Parents & Low Income Families***

***Reforms Will Be Targeted At Tackling Child Poverty & Obstacles To
Employment, Education And Training***

The Minister for Social Affairs, Seamus Brennan T.D., announced today that he is planning to bring forward proposals for legislation during the course of this year to begin reforming restrictive social policies in the whole area of lone parents and low income families.

Minister Brennan said that many lone parents and their children are at particular risk of social exclusion and poverty and the planned legislation would specifically address the difficulties many of the country's 80,000 one parent families on welfare supports encounter in areas such as access to employment, education and training, income supports, childcare, cohabitation rules and unfair stereotyping.

The Minister made his comments at the special **National Consultative Forum** which he convened in Dublin to discuss, assess and debate the findings and recommendations of the major Government discussion paper, ***Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents*** which was published in March.

He said he had called the Forum so as to provide a platform for all views to be aired and for all sections of society to be heard on a social policy issue of enormous importance in Ireland at the start of the 21st century.

Those attending the National Forum included groups and organizations representing lone parents, national anti-poverty organizations, national children support organizations, men's support groups, family support groups, members of the Dáil and Seanad, national social and economic research organizations and relevant Government Departments.



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Minister Brennan said: "The Government discussion paper is the most comprehensive review of the welfare of lone parents undertaken for several years and it has a valuable input to make to the final shape and structure of reforms that are necessary and urgent. The debate that has followed its publication and the views from today's Forum will also be of considerable value in the preparing of the legislation to bring about the reforms. I look forward to a meeting of minds on the central issues by the time, later this year, that I bring forward specific proposals for legislation that will have at its core the targeting of child poverty, and measures directed at delivering new opportunities and a better standard of living for lone parents and their children, and for all low income families."

There are currently some 80,000 lone parents - almost 98% of them women - in receipt of One Parent Family Payments at a cost in 2005 of €770 million. When other supports and entitlements are taken into account, including Child Benefit, Rent Supplement and Family Income Supplement, total expenditure is over €1.3 billion. Despite the unprecedented growth of the Irish economy over the last decade and record spending on social welfare, lone parents remain one of the groups who are particularly vulnerable to poverty.

Minister Brennan said: "I want to stress that the reforms that I am working towards introducing are not about achieving savings for the Exchequer. In fact the reforms would require increased funding in the short term. The reforms are about introducing more enlightened social policies that directly target and benefit the lives of tens of thousands of people, especially children, who are for the most part caught in restrictive poverty traps. The reforms are about ending the cohabitation rules so that the parents of a child or children can live together as a family, free from the current restrictive arrangement that has State inspectors checking to make sure a child's parents are living separately. In 21st century Ireland that is not good social policy."

The Minister said lone parents are a valuable resource: "Behind the statistics are very real lives, day-to-day pressures, lives given to providing the best for children and lives searching for greater fulfilment. Lone parents have the added responsibility of providing care for their children as well as often being the sole breadwinner. We have a responsibility to use the income support system and wider



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welfare supports to address the problems behind that income need, to tackle the social issues and pressures that blunt fulfilment and curb aspirations. Movement into employment is the best way out of poverty and it is a transition that can transform lives, but is not always smooth. Obstacles can emerge along the way. The reforms I am working towards are to tackle these obstacles and to replace them with incentives and activation measures designed to people's needs and abilities".

Minister Brennan said that, overall, the conclusion of the Government report is that while income support remains crucial and must be adequate to meet needs, passive income support alone is not sufficient if poverty, particularly child poverty, and social exclusion are to be comprehensively addressed and people are to have financial independence and reach their potential.

He said the supports which are provided to lone parents, while substantial, have to date been passive in nature, with no active or systematic supports in assisting the person to take up education, training or employment opportunities. Currently a person in receipt of OFP can continue to receive their payment until their child is 18, or 22 if in full time education, with no direct intervention by the state. This long term welfare dependency is not in the best interests of the lone parent, their children or society in general.

The report puts forward radical proposals for reform of the income support system for all parents on a low income and the implementation of an integrated programme to support the movement by lone parents into more full-time and quality employment involving the development of a comprehensive package of supports to be delivered using a cross government approach.

The aim of the proposed reforms is to:

- Prevent long term dependence on social welfare income support and facilitate financial independence.
- Facilitate participation in employment /education and training in a positive and supportive way.
- Remove poverty traps from the system of income support.
- Provide income support at a level sufficient to enable full participation in society.



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- Recognise parental choice with regard to care of young children but with the expectation that parents will not remain outside of the labour force indefinitely.
- Change the expectations surrounding receipt of One-Parent Family Payment, introducing an expectation of participation but with supports provided in this regard.
- End the cohabitation rule by making it neutral in terms of influencing people's basic choices regarding their living arrangements.
- Ensure consistency of treatment across means tested social welfare schemes.

Ends