



Speech by Minister Martin Cullen TD

Minister for Social and Family Affairs

at the launch of

WORK IT OUT

“A booklet to help lone parents receiving the One-Parent Family Payment to look at the options / schemes which are available when considering (re)entering the workforce, education or training.”

Thursday 28 February 2008, IFSC, Dublin



Department of Social and Family Affairs

*Chair of Treoir, **Ms Eilis Walsh**; Vice Chair, **Ms Berit Anderson**; other board members of Treoir who are present with us today; CEO, **Ms Margaret Dromey**; Information Officer, **Ms Veronica Black**; invited guests including representatives from the **HSE** and the **Crisis Pregnancy Agency** (a core funder); **staff of my own Department**; ladies and gentlemen:*

WELCOME and ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to start by both thanking Treoir for your kind invitation to launch your booklet "Work It Out" here today in Gandon House and by congratulating you on the work undertaken to date as the National Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children. This work goes back to your establishment in 1975 when you recognised - even at that time - the evident diversity of family life in Ireland.

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today. It is my first visit to Treoir and at the outset, I would like in particular to mention a number of people including your Honorary President, **Dr Dermot Walsh**, your Chair, **Ms Eilis Walsh** and **Ms Gemma Rowley** all of whom have given long and distinguished service to Treoir as indeed has the current Chief Executive, **Ms Margaret Dromey**.

I mentioned Gemma Rowley; I might mention Gemma in particular as I know she was a long-standing supporter of the idea of a national longitudinal study of children in Ireland. The development of policies in relation to children, needs to be evidence-based and take account of the most up-to-date information about children's requirements. Now, supported by my Department and funded by the Office of the Minister for Children, this idea first mentioned by Treoir, has been initiated and commenced with its first sweep of research last year.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

The study is the most significant of its kind ever undertaken in this country particularly in terms of the scope and length of study period, studying some 10,000 infants aged nine months and 8,000 children aged nine years.

WORK OF TREOIR

The work undertaken and advanced by Treoir over the past 30 years has played no small part in influencing change in policy with regard to lone parent families and in this regard I know they value very highly the contributions made by their constituent members including Barnardo's, OPEN, the Adoption Society, Clare Care and PASS in Finglas. I welcome any members of those organisations who are here with us today.

With the pace of life and the changes that are taking place in crucial family and community networks because of that pace, it has become more difficult for people to maintain strong and stable relationships. Separation and divorce, while not at the levels of other countries, are nonetheless on the increase.

Children above all benefit from stability and continuity in their family life and from a regular and close relationship with both parents. The changing nature of family life in Ireland today has by its nature led to a greater role for state interaction with families.

In relation to lone parents, the key financial support provided by the Department of Social and Family Affairs is the One-Parent Family Payment – a payment for men and women who are bringing up their child or their children without the support of a partner.

Lone parenthood has increased dramatically since Treoir was set up over 30 years ago. Today there are over 85,000 lone parents, with 140,000 children, in receipt



of the One-Parent Family Payment. These lone parents are not a homogeneous group but are of differing ages, education and employment backgrounds. These include single, separated, divorced and widowed parents.

PROPOSALS FOR SUPPORTING LONE PARENTS

As you know, a Government discussion paper "Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents" addresses the social exclusion and risk of poverty faced by many such families and their children and puts forward a range of proposals, some complex and others radical, for the reforming of the sometimes restrictive social policies in the area of Lone Parents. Proposals include expanding the availability and range of education and training opportunities; the extension of the National Employment Action Plan; focused provision of childcare; improved information services and the introduction of a new social assistance payment for low income families with young children.

In essence the report searches for solutions to the problems confronting lone parents, their children and other families on low incomes. It aims to point the way towards solutions, towards new opportunities and greater fulfilment for lone parents and towards better lives and prospects for their children.

We have a responsibility to use the income support system, as proposed in the Government Discussion Paper and wider welfare supports to address the problems behind those income needs. We also have a responsibility to confront the social issues and pressures that blunt fulfilment and curb aspirations.

One of the proposed reforms in that document, and one that I know is of particular interest to Treoir, is the removal of the cohabitation rule which acts as a disincentive to lone parents forming relationships.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

In 21st century Ireland, this is not an aspect of social policy that I agree with, and is one of the issues that I propose to change. The social welfare system should be neutral with regard to people's choice of life style or living arrangements. It should not be a disincentive to family formation.

Under the proposals, the contingency of lone parenthood would no longer exist. Instead, a new payment would be made to all parents (living alone or with a partner) with young children on low income.

I intend to bring forward in the not too distant future, proposals for legislation that will have at its core the introduction of a policy that will set about opening up more choice and opportunities for lone parents.

At present the Department of Social and Family Affairs, with the co-operation of FÁS, the Office of the Minister for Children and the Department of Education and Science, is testing the non-income activation proposals in Coolock and in Kilkenny. These tests are focusing on identifying and resolving any practical and administrative issues that may arise in advance of any scheme being introduced. The tests are now expected to run until at least the end of February, with a report then being made to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion.

THE NEW BOOKLET – WORK IT OUT

But now ladies in gentlemen, back to the specific task at hand today. As an organization you are very well known for your publications – (going back many years to one of your first information projects which was a *Directory of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children*).

This new booklet which I am happy to launch today is an informative, easy-to-follow guide which will prove invaluable to lone parents assessing their options



Department of Social and Family Affairs

when they are starting work or deciding perhaps to re enter the workforce, or returning to education and training. It contains a wealth of information running to just over 60 pages on topics such as Social Welfare Entitlements, Employment Supports, Education and Training and Childcare.

The booklet is concise which makes it very user friendly and accessible. The information contained will allow readers to make informed choices regarding their social welfare entitlements and the range of other supports available. Information projects such as this booklet empower people to access their rights and therefore I was pleased that the Department of Social and Family Affairs provided some funding (€37,400) towards its publication.

In conclusion, I would to thank and congratulate Treoir on the publication of this booklet and on the committed work that you have undertaken over the last 30 years in promoting policies to support unmarried parents and their children.

I wish you continued success in the area of information provision; in promoting the welfare of unmarried parents and their children and in bringing further awareness of the issues affecting unmarried parents and their children to the general public.

Thank you all very much.

SPEECH ENDS