

#### The Teen Parents Support Programme

The Teen Parents Support Programme (TPSP) consists of eleven separate projects funded by TUSLA and the HSE and located throughout the country in a range of statutory, community and voluntary organisations. The TPSP engages with young people who become parents when they are under 20 years of age and supports them to build their capacity as parents as well as completing their own development as adolescents moving towards early adulthood. See [www.tpsp.ie](http://www.tpsp.ie) Support is offered in all areas of the young person's life – parenting, health, relationships, education, training, childcare, accommodation, social welfare entitlements, legal issues and anything else about which the young person is concerned.

In 2017 the TPSP supported 861 young parents, their children and families. This represents over a quarter of all the teen parents in the country and the TPSP believes that the issues raised in this Submission is representative of all young parents. In addition to the personal challenges involved in taking on the roles and responsibilities of parenthood, a large majority of these young people are also lone parents in receipt of One-parent Family Payment (OFP). The connection between lone parenthood and poverty and the difficulties in breaking that cycle is well documented and does not need to be repeated here. At the same time, with almost 20 years' experience of providing individual support to young parents, the TPSP knows that interventions that are well targeted and timely can end long-term dependence on social welfare and break the cycle of intergenerational deprivation.

#### Review of the TPSP Pre-budget Submission 2018

In reviewing the TPSP's Pre-Budget Submission 2018, we would like to acknowledge the progress that has been made regarding some of its recommendations.

Since October 2018, Child Benefit has been paid directly to all new applicants under 16 years of age. This ensures consistency across all schemes of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) in terms of how young mothers are treated. While the numbers involved are small, it is an important change for those affected.

The TPSP also welcomes the fact that under Section 14 and Schedule 2 of the Childcare Support Act 2018 the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs includes mothers in second level education as a vulnerable group. This will allow certain exceptions to be made for them in relation to funding childcare which responds to their individual circumstances. It will support young mothers to complete their Leaving Certificate, increase the likelihood of their becoming financially independent in the future and is an example of the kind of targeted supports referred to above.

#### Pre-budget Submission 2019

The recommendations in this Submission are based on the experience of TPSP service users and the project staff who support them. Some of the Recommendations require that DEASP advocate for young parents with other Government Departments such as with the Cross-Departmental Group convened to respond to the report *'An Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation'* which was published in August 2017.

This Submission deals with the 3 main challenges which currently confront young parents:

- Barriers to completing education/training
- Accessing Exceptional Needs Payments
- Housing Needs

### Barriers to completing training /education

*'We want people to get a job, a better job and then a career'*

(Regina Doherty, T.D. Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection. Social Inclusion Forum, 10 May 2018)

The TPSP shares the Minister's aspiration for the young people it supports and knows that education and training are the best routes to good jobs and careers that will take them and their children out of poverty. In the experience of the TPSP the following act as barriers to young parents progressing to training or education:

- The cost of training
- Conditions attached to the BTEA
- Lack of eligibility for the SUSI grant

#### **The cost of training**

Since the discontinuation of the Training Allowance, the TPSP continues to notice a reduction in the number of young mothers attending training courses. This is because they cannot afford the additional costs involved. In the past many of the young mothers who availed of training were early school leavers. Training courses re-introduced them to learning, gave them new work skills, gave them access to career guidance, helped them to develop a work routine and improved the likelihood of their progressing to further vocational based training, PLCs and Third Level. In short, they provided at a much earlier stage of parenthood the kind of 'activation' which DEASP is proposing for lone parents on Job Seekers Transition.

#### **Recommendation:**

- That the DEASP introduce a realistic Cost of Training Allowance for lone parents undertaking training courses.

#### **Conditions attached to the Back to Education Allowance**

The conditions attached to eligibility for BTEA depend on a combination of age and the category of Social Welfare Payment one receives. Young mothers under 20 years of age and in receipt of OFP must be out of education for at least 2 years before they qualify. This enforced break can be demotivating and can have the effect of their not returning to education at all.

The TPSP would like to see the distinction removed between OFP recipients aged under 20 years and those over 20 years. It would also like to see the Department explore the possibility of lowering the qualifying age of 18 years. The TPSP often works with young mothers who either never transferred to Second Level education or left second level at a very young age without completing their Junior Certificate. With support, they could return to education before they reach 18 years of age.

#### **Recommendations:**

- That, regarding eligibility for BTEA, DEASP remove the age distinction between OFP recipients under and over 20 years of age
- That DEASP examine lowering the qualifying age for BTEA.

#### **The SUSI Grant**

The TPSP is proposing that the SUSI grant be reintroduced for lone parents in receipt of BTEA; that SUSI be extended to part-time students and that DEASP advocate for more part-time Third Level courses to balance the needs of its customers wishing to return to education.

Currently, lone parents who are required to transfer from OFP to BTEA to attend Higher Education are not eligible for the maintenance component of the SUSI grant, making it practically impossible for them to make this transition. For all students, the maintenance component of the grant scheme covers only part of their living costs. This is even more so for lone parents with the costs of rearing their family, contributing to childcare and meeting all the additional incidental costs of being a student. With BTEA as their sole income, these additional study related costs are prohibitive. The TPSP believes that this creates an inequitable situation for those lone parents with the motivation to attend Third Level education.

In addition, for most lone parents, it is not possible to combine looking after their family and attendance at full-time degree courses. They need more family-friendly, flexible, modular based degree courses where they can gather credits over time. They also need a maintenance grant in addition to OFP or BTEA. This more flexible model of Third Level education would also suit other customers of DEASP such as those in receipt of disability payments.

#### **Recommendations:**

- That DEASP, as part of the Cross-Department Group referred to above, advocate for the restoration of the maintenance component of the SUSI grant for recipients of BTEA and for the extension of the SUSI grant to those on part-time courses
- That DEASP also advocate with the HEA for more part-time degree courses to accommodate mature students with other responsibilities and challenges.

### Accessing Exceptional Needs Payments

Many young expectant mothers have no income (or have very low income) and therefore find it impossible to save. Through the Exceptional Needs Payments scheme, DEASP may provide these young people with once-off financial support to enable them buy necessary items for themselves and their babies both pre and post birth. The discretionary nature of these payments can make proving eligibility very difficult, however. This continues to be an ongoing problem despite discussions with Department staff and the training which the Department gives to its officials.

The main problems can be summarised as follows:

- The information which customers are given about the existence of certain payments/eligibility for payments varies from one part of the country to another
- Young parents living at home are means tested on the overall household income-to which they often have no access
- Attitudes to the applicants can be negative and whether the payment is granted can be dependent on which officer is dealing with the application-even within the same office

The TPSP is fully aware of the discretionary nature of Exceptional Needs Payments and acknowledges that this discretion can often favour the young parents we support. Nonetheless there is a need to eliminate misinformation and to have eligibility criteria applied more consistency across the country.

#### **Recommendation:**

- That DEASP produce clear written information regarding the items/situations which may be eligible for Exceptional Needs Payment and their eligibility criteria
- That this information be posted clearly in all local DEASP offices.
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### Housing

In June 2018, the TPSP was actively supporting 560 young parents. Of these, 25% (140) had a housing need divided as follows:

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| • Sleeping rough (with their children in care): | 4  |
| • In short-term emergency accommodation:        | 37 |
| • In insecure housing:                          | 41 |
| • In inadequate housing:                        | 58 |

This compares with 105 who had a housing need when a similar census of service users was carried out in 2016. In 2016, no young parent supported by the TPSP was sleeping rough and 23 were in short-term emergency accommodation (compared to 37 in 2018).

For young parents to be homeless is catastrophic with wide ranging and long-term consequences. Homelessness affects all aspects of their lives and the lives of their children-their health, education, the ability to parent, their children's development and their ability to sustain tenancies in the future. Apart from the personal cost, there is a social and financial cost which the State (and the DEASP, in particular) will carry into the future.

Research conducted into young people experiencing homelessness has shown that sustainable exits from homelessness are disproportionately low due to lack of support. Despite this, there has been little policy response to the plight of homeless young people, including young parents. *Rebuilding Ireland* contains no reference to youth homelessness, apart from highlighting the importance of looking after the housing needs of those leaving care.

Many of the homeless young mothers, whom the TPSP supports, come from family situations with pre-existing social disadvantage. They lack life experience and have poor coping skills which makes it difficult for some of them to transition successfully to independent living. The TPSP believes that *Housing First for Youth* is an effective model for supporting the transition to independent living for young people. A *Housing First* approach ensures that the young person can first access a secure and stable home, and then be provided with a tailored and flexible support plan to meet their individual needs e.g. healthcare, education & training, financial advice and counselling.

#### **Recommendations:**

- That DEASP advocate for the extension of the *Youth Housing First* model of support and
- Advocate that new Housing Policies/Strategies contain a Homeless Youth Strategy.

#### Summary of Recommendations

- That the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection introduce a realistic Cost of Training Allowance for lone parents undertaking training courses
- That, regarding eligibility for BTEA, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection remove the age distinction between OFP recipients under and over 20 years of age
- That the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection examine lowering the qualifying age for BTEA
- That the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection as part of the Cross-Department Group responding to '*An Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation*' (2017) advocate for the restoration of the maintenance component of the SUSI grant for recipients of BTEA and for the extension of the SUSI grant to those on part-time courses
- That the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection also advocates with the HEA for more part-time degree courses to accommodate mature students with other responsibilities and challenges
- That the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection produce clear written information regarding the items/situations which may be eligible for Exceptional Needs Payment and their eligibility criteria
- That this information be posted clearly in all local the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection offices.
- That the Department of Employment Affairs and Youth Affairs advocates for the extension of the *Youth Housing First* model of support and
- Advocates that new Housing Policies/Strategies contain a Homeless Youth Strategy.

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13 July 2018