

No seven-year-old should be the poster child for austerity ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

One-parent welfare reforms must take place in tandem with improved childcare provision

THE SOCIAL Welfare and Pensions Bill 2012, which is due to be signed into law today, signals a dramatic, unprecedented and unnecessary policy change for one-parent families in receipt of a social welfare payment.

A programme of reform has been under way since 2006. This originally would have seen the introduction of a parental allowance for all low-income families, regardless of whether they were headed by one or two parents, thereby eliminating the old-fashioned cohabitation rule.

An amended proposal was finally passed into legislation in April last year.

Under this, new claimants of the one-parent family payment were to be eligible only in respect of children under the age of 14. It is a means-tested payment for men and women who are bringing up a child - or children - without the support of a partner.

Fourteen is admittedly an older age than applies to similar payments in other countries. It was chosen by the Department of Social Protection, we are told, in recognition of the lack of proper childcare infrastructure.

This lack of adequate childcare and after-school care remains an ongoing obstacle to lone parents wishing to take up employment. In addition, lone parents face considerable access issues associated with education and training provision, which are themselves under pressure because of our unemployment crisis.

None of this has changed since last April. Yet, some eight months later, on December 5th last, Minister for Social Protection Joan Burton announced that the planned age of 14 was being halved to seven.

There are limited exceptions for those who are parenting alone due to bereavement (they have an extra two years' grace) and for those who are also in receipt of a domiciliary care allowance.

The stated reasons for introducing this drastic reform are two-fold.

"Activation policies" to get people off welfare and into work as part of the agreement with the troika are cited, as is a declared need to bring Ireland into line with international practice regarding the age limits associated with lone-parent payments.

These reasons are flawed, as is the thinking behind this so-called reform.

There is no reference to either the one-parent family payment or seven-year-olds in the troika's memorandum of understanding, and in any event we were already implementing change to the scheme.

In addition, the recession is characterised by severe unemployment. Unemployed lone parents will in the future move to a jobseeker's payment, thus swelling the numbers on the dole, with zero savings to the exchequer.

Finally, the proposal flies in the face of the Government's stated intentions when it came into office. The following commitment is in the programme for government: "Over time, one-parent family payment will be replaced with a parental allowance that does not discourage marriage, cohabitation or work."

Following widespread concern since the budget 2012 announcement on the issue, the Minister gave the Dáil a commitment when she introduced the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill on April 18th last.

She stated that, unless she had a bankable, credible plan agreed by Cabinet by December to ensure "Scandinavian" childcare was in place by 2014, she would withdraw the so-called reforms.

The three organisations involved in the "Seven is too young" campaign met the Minister following this unexpected announcement. Barnardos, the National Women's Council of Ireland and lone-parents' group Open were pleased to note that the Minister is against any specific childcare provision that is linked solely to the "activation" of lone parents. She agrees with us that this would be stigmatising and that it is vital that the development of a comprehensive system of childcare and after-school care must be based first and foremost on children's developmental needs.

The three organisations also clarified what is meant by "Scandinavian" childcare. The Nordic countries use varying models but share two

characteristics: childcare provision is provided on a publicly subsidised basis, albeit with everyone from the poorest family to the wealthiest paying something; and quality service is paramount.

The challenge facing the Minister and the Government is enormous. In the long run, publicly funded childcare can be, and should be, developed to be cost neutral.

The entry of more parents, especially mothers, into the workforce provides taxes to a society. And, of course, children whose educational, social and developmental needs are met fully are far less likely to need costly state interventions as they become adults.

But there has been no significant investment in the development of after-school care to date, so it will require significant resources. An after-school care system that is cemented in law and subject to consistent standards and regulations across all providers throughout the State needs to be developed.

Investment in training and in the professional development of the sector is vital. There is no way that this can be delivered on a low-cost or cost-neutral basis in the short term, unless quality is sacrificed, which is unthinkable.

We cannot have childcare that is provided on a piecemeal, low-cost basis via community employment or some other training scheme. Children will not benefit from it and it will be a false economy in the long term for our society.

The Minister has chosen to focus on childcare. There are other major challenges: the education and training provision is overstretched; other key areas of social income supports need reform; and, even if the welcome ambition to have 21st-century childcare is realised, where are the jobs?

Those who share concerns about the serious levels of poverty that affect one-parent families are in favour of social welfare reform. The content of the Social Welfare Bill will not achieve this unless the critical issue of childcare is addressed, as the Minister has described.

The Minister will need to, therefore, have the courage, along with her Cabinet colleagues, to offer a clear and honest assessment in December on whether this has in fact happened. Otherwise the stated agenda to improve economic independence among lone parents will be set back by many years. One-parent families will be consigned to live in long-term social exclusion. Perceptions about "sponging off the system" will increase. And most worryingly of all, thousands of children will grow up in poverty.

Even in these times of severity, some values must not be trampled upon. Society and its political leadership must not allow any seven-year-old to become the poster child for austerity, not now and not in 2014.

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