Learning from Families: National Report, Ireland

Geraldine French

*Technological University Dublin*, geraldine.french@tudublin.ie

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Learning from Families

Policies and Practices to Combat Social Exclusion amongst Families with Young Children in Europe

National Report, Ireland, 2005

Prepared for the Home-Start National Office by Geraldine French

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The “Learning from Families” Project Team and Country Responsibilities

Project Coordinator
Home-Start International, responsible for the overall delivery of the project
2nd Floor
6 Market Place
London W1W 8AF, UK

Project coordinator
Brian Waller
Project Administrator
Alexandra Sibun

Project Partner – Greece
Institute of Social Protection and Solidarity (ISPS), responsible for the Greek National Report and the Practical Framework
Department Research & Evaluation
6, Ypatias Str
Athens 10556, Greece

Researcher/Coordinator
Evi Hatzivarnava – Kazassi
Researchers
George Handanos

Project Partner – Hungary
Otthon Segítünk Alapítvány, Home-Start Hungary, responsible for the Hungarian National Report, the products and children’s drawings
H-1114 Budapest
Bartok Bela ut 37
Hungary

Coordinator
Ágota Benkő
Researchers
Beata David, Reka Hegedűs

Project Partner – Ireland
Enterprise Centre
17, Rathfarnham Road
Terenure
Dublin, 6W Republic of Ireland

Coordinator
Anna Lynch
Researchers
Geraldine French

Project Partner – U.K.
Home-Start UK, responsible for the England and Wales Report and joint responsibility for writing the Transnational Report
2 Salisbury Road
Leicester LE1 7QR, UK

Coordinator
Maggie Rowlands
Researchers
Sheila Shinman, Ph.D.

Editor
Jackie Robinson

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Foreword

The rather technical term “Social Exclusion” conveys little about what it actually means for the millions of people who are on the margins of modern European society. In this study, parents with young children talk about their experiences of being out of the mainstream of social and economic life. Their testimony offers a moving and telling insight both on national policies and on public service provision.

As the often neglected casualties of utilitarian thinking, their ideas and proposals for change demand attention. The families were drawn from Greece, Hungary, Ireland and, in the UK, from England and Wales - and they had experienced very different problems. It is all the more significant, therefore, that their stories were often markedly similar. Perhaps, as we reflect on their experiences, the processes which take people into and out of social exclusion will merit more attention.

Whilst this report and the associated tool kits for policy makers and managers, videos and family leaflets are the product of a joint team of researchers, its essence lies in the remarkable insights and ideas offered by the families themselves. In this lies its significance both as a contemporary picture of real lives and a reminder of the importance of genuine engagement with those who are affected by public policy. This report features what Irish families tell us.

Brian Waller
Project Coordinator
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Executive Summary of European Project


**What is this project about?**

The project, one of a number funded by the EU as part of its interest in tackling social exclusion, has focussed on the experiences and views of parents with very young children. This group of people are of special interest, given what is now known about the crucial importance of providing a positive and nurturing environment for children in their very early years. Neglecting children is not only wrong but it has life long and costly consequences, both for them and for the wider community. The study was designed to look not just at socially excluded families, but at those who, in addition, were finding it difficult to ask for help. Our chief interest was in seeking their opinions and ideas about how public policies and services had affected their lives and how they thought these might be improved.

**How was the study conducted?**

The project has been carried out in Greece, Hungary, Ireland and the UK. Within the UK we were able to talk to families in England and in Wales. The study has involved researchers interviewing parents in their own homes and in groups. The families faced different challenges in their lives. These included being disabled or having a child with a disability, being on their own as “single parents”, and being immigrants. The study did not seek the views of children directly – but it was concerned to hear from their parents about the impact social exclusion was having on their children’s lives and prospects. The study also looked behind the National Action Plans for
Social Inclusion (NAPs /incl) 2001 – 3 and 2003 – 5 at the key policies (and their challenges) to promote social inclusion as expressed by policy makers, programme developers, academics and representatives of relevant statutory and voluntary agencies in the partner countries.

The researchers in this project did not, a little unusually, have their own theories to test out on families. Instead, by using an approach which involved qualitative thematic analysis, all the ideas and conclusions reported here have come from the families’ own experiences.

**What did the families say about their experiences?**

The families, regardless of their nationality or particular problems, gave graphic and, at times, moving accounts of what it means, in modern Europe, to be outside of the mainstream life enjoyed and experienced by the great majority of other families. Whilst this is perhaps not surprising, it is nonetheless shocking to hear at first hand just how corrosive and debilitating social exclusion can be, especially where very young children are involved. The familiar statistics on poverty, unemployment and social isolation take on a new significance when attached to real people who are much more impoverished than the raw numbers might suggest. Words like “battle”, “conflict” and “despair” all frequently used by the parents, suggest that once families fall below certain thresholds their lives become disproportionately challenging and miserable.

Families felt that policies were too often inflexible and family unfriendly and that public services were frequently hostile and stigmatising, as well as being difficult to access and negotiate. In one sense it might be said that these families were the ones that had been failed by the system. The “poverty trap” is but one example of this. It is as if both policies and services were designed to cater for 90% of the population - but overlooking the fact that if everyone’s needs are not met then there are very likely to be consequences and casualties. The parents in the study were deeply worried, aware and depressed about how all of this affected their children even though they worked hard to try to shelter them from the most immediate impact of deprivation.
Families had valuable insights to share as to what had taken them into social exclusion and also, for some, what was helping them to move back into normal life. Their experience varied from nation to nation inevitably according to how well developed policies and services were for families. There were, though, some significant common themes suggesting that the processes into and out of social exclusion may transcend national boundaries and even the nature of the problems faced by families.

What ideas and suggestions did families have to make life better?
Families felt that help should be provided much earlier than was usual – that preventive services should be developed that could help them deal with problems before they become crises – and that national policies needed to explicitly reflect the special situation of families with young children. Many agencies should be included in these policies as families needed to make use of a wide range of services – housing, transport, health, education and employment as well as child and family services.

In particular they asked that Family Support services, which could both guide and support young families, should be made widely available and accessible. Information about services was of crucial importance as well as, improved coordination and cooperation between the many services likely to be involved.

Policies and services for families should be more responsive and flexible than at present. It is unusual to find policies that take proper account of the uniqueness of each family - although the UK’s Sure Start programme is one good example of such enlightenment. Services, too, need to become much less judgemental and stigmatising if parents are to feel confident and have a sense of self worth.

These issues take on a special significance for parents in balancing work and family life. For too many of them there are no real choices and, on both sides of this equation, governments need to do more to develop policies and to influence employers and the wider public as to the importance of providing genuine options which parents can choose between according to their circumstances and needs.

What else has come from the research?
As well as reports for each nation and a combined transnational report the project has developed a tool kit for policy makers and service managers (See Part 6 – The Practical Framework). This should help them to review existing practice as well as to suggest that a much greater willingness to engage with and listen to families can be the key to better outcomes. Other products include a video in which families are shown speaking out and a leaflet for families themselves.

The importance of learning from families themselves is the key message from this project – not just to be done tokenistically- but in a way that includes every group and really takes seriously what families have to say. After all they are the experts.

**What happens next?**
This project comes to an end with the publication of the Transnational report and national reports their associated materials, available on the Home-Start International website: [www.home-start-int.org](http://www.home-start-int.org) from February 2006. Its usefulness will now depend upon the readiness of others, especially those in government and those with responsibility for service provision, to really hear what families have said and build this into their own approaches to planning and delivering the wide range of services - especially preventive services - needed by families with small children. Its chief message is not primarily about major new expenditure or programmes. It is much more about recognising the diversity of needs that exist and finding imaginative ways of responding to every family’s unique circumstances.

That is quite a challenge.
Executive Summary of the Irish National Report

The overall aim of *Learning from Families* is to address government policies and programmes from the point of view of families of young children themselves, in order to help governments, statutory and voluntary bodies develop policies and build social environments that help low income families out of their situation. The first part of this project outlined the challenges facing policy makers and the key principles underpinning policy developments in the partner countries. It looked behind the *National Action Plans against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2001 – 3 and 2003 – 5* at the rationale for the main policies to promote social inclusion in families with young children and what is thought to contribute to positive and less positive outcomes for families (see www.home-start-int.org for full report). Reasons why there is such limited attention to vulnerable families of this age group and the special measures available to them were explored as well as what this project could contribute. Policies and practices that seek to help families with children under five years of age in each participating country was mapped.

Part II focussed on documenting families’ experiences and encounters at the receiving end of policies, to understand the barriers to the use of services and full participation in society. This is the main part of the inquiry (and the body of this report) and is from the perspective of families who are particularly non or reluctant users of services. It was agreed to carry out small, qualitative studies in each country of a maximum of ten families based on person-to-person interviews. These were held in October and November 2004. In addition, it was agreed, that in Ireland lone parents would be the focus of study. Subsequent to the analysis of the studies revealing areas requiring further study, clarification was sought through two Family Reference Groups which were conducted in March and April 2005. An interview schedule was developed which combined having clearly identified items for discussion and flexibility to allow respondents answer spontaneously and develop points of particular interest to them resulting in person-to-person semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was employed. The context of social exclusion is analysed drawing on the families’ experiences with regard to the dimensions of social exclusion (income and benefits; resources, employment and training, social network, public services, and the subjective nature of social exclusion); the impact of their situation on their children; risk and protective factors, the process into and out of social exclusion and assessment of interventions. The following summarises the findings from the Irish perspective.
Regarding **income and benefits**: all families living on social welfare reported that their income is not adequate to meet their needs (particularly lone parents); families struggle with the cost of living and the particular costs of young children; indebtedness is common; families are without financial capacity for birthdays, emergencies, entertainment or holidays; there is a lack of free activities for families. The negative impact of working or receiving maintenance and losing benefits was asserted. For those without medical cards and on low incomes: medical costs, the unfairness of thresholds beyond which families are ineligible for benefits and the length of time to become eligible for schemes was reported. The inquiry into the families’ **resources** revealed that there were no opportunities to save money. Resources identified included: the value of training and education; relationships, with the disincentive for couples to form relationships expressed; the need for secure accommodation, safe play spaces and recreational activities for children; and cars which were considered a resource because without them families would be trapped. Themes relating to **employment and training** were: wanting to care for their very young children combined with the desire to work part-time; the consequent need for affordable childcare; the positive experience of CE schemes and the earnings disregard. Whereas many of the families had positive relationship with their own parents and siblings the following themes emerged: there is a lack of a **social network**; there is an inability of the extended family to help; there was dependency on parents for accommodation in the initial stages of parenthood; that for lone parents there is a need to have a phone to talk to other adults and that families spend a lot of time indoors. Families’ inability to look for or accept help from **public services** was due to a lack of services in one area. However, in general a lack of information; unhelpful attitudes by public servants and conflicting information given; having to demean oneself to get assistance; distances to travel with poor public transport; queuing for lengthy periods; lack of co-ordination among public servants when moving location and non return of phone messages contributed to families’ inability to access support. However some positive experiences with public and voluntary services were identified. **Feelings** of isolation, loneliness, and worthlessness were expressed; overwhelming responsibility was unanimous amongst lone parents combined with exhaustion; lack of preparation and knowledge regarding being a parent; intimidation; the desire to shift from welfare dependency and the consequent lack of independence; humiliation and degradation; stigmatisation; and concern about the impact of the situation on their children.
Life events such as pregnancy and relationship breakdown contributed to the process into social exclusion in combination with other factors such as low self esteem, mental ill health (as indicated by prescription of anti-depressants), lack of family support and poor education, consequently the inability to get well paid jobs, unemployment and a lack of childcare. Many lived in fear that their children would be taken away from them. Breaking points towards seeking help included: accusations of instability and being an unfit mother, post natal depression, general depression, inexperience and lack of parenting skills in caring for their children, children’s difficult behaviour or language difficulties and in some cases an incident was also identified. Turning points towards some alleviation of the circumstances were supported by persistence on behalf of the Home-Start Co-ordinators; involving several visits to the homes, establishing trust and inviting and succeeding in facilitating parents to join the family mornings. Accompanying families was important. Direct involvement with Home-Start is one aspect of the process out of social exclusion identified by the families; links made to other agencies and services also contributed. Attending self development, assertiveness courses and parenting programmes inspired them to go on to further education. However it is not accurate to say that their problems are resolved. They still have insufficient income to meet their requirements; they still must wait for the ill-timed delivery of grant aid and they still struggle with childcare.

Interventions and assessment: Home-Start was perceived as a befriending flexible service. The Co-ordinators and volunteers operate as a sounding board for families, a safety net and enabler. Home-Start operates as a conduit between the families and other diverse services in the area continuing to support them in whatever way they can. Barnardos’ pre-school and toy library service is appreciated and Aisteor Beo was valued due to increased parenting skills and speech and language support. Regarding Government policy three main barriers for families who want to work part-time outside the home or return to work or education were identified: the cost of childcare, the loss of benefits accruing if you do work (particularly those lone parents living in private rental accommodation or in receipt of maintenance) and the need for sympathetic employers.

Recommendations: There is a clear need for a substantial increase in social welfare payments (particularly for lone parents) and reduced indebtedness by speedy processing of any social welfare applications and timing of payments to meet the intended need. This can be facilitated by increased Government regulation of banks,
money lenders and credit card companies who entice debt. The financial penalties inherent within the social welfare system triggered by couples co-habiting, securing maintenance payments and earning an income while on rent allowance should be removed. Access and availability of education and training with childcare should be enhanced; and improved infrastructure such as recreational facilities and transport should be provided. Increased parental leave is recommended in addition to addressing the cost and availability of childcare for those parents that want to work combined with flexible working arrangements. The social support network of families should be improved through the development of community based services. Finally a centralised universal system of information dissemination should be developed which is easily accessible, and workers in public services should be trained to develop a client based approach, which would be non-judgemental, respectful, trusting and co-ordinated.

**Conclusion:** As identified in our proposal for this project and has been proven in this inquiry, family support services can bring about change by engendering a sense of hope, facilitating access to services and improving parental capacities and skills. EU-SILC, (CSO, 2005) revealed the crucial need to reform the current supports for one-parent families and the Government have studied the area and progress is being made. Announcements on Budget 2006 proposed substantial increases in social welfare and the amount a lone parent can earn without impacting on their benefits. In addition welcome statements have been made to drop the co-habiting rule. However, there is no need for complacency; overall, Ireland has one of the lowest levels of social protection expenditure in Europe (16.5 per cent of GNP, compared to an EU average of 27.3 per cent). If we really want to make a difference to families experiencing poverty we need greater investment in family support services, social welfare and greater equality in education.

Drawing on the experience of families themselves emerging from Part II, Part III offers practical framework/guidelines for policy and practice to promote social inclusion. In addition materials were produced such as DVDs, reports and family-friendly materials for dissemination. The researcher is Geraldine French and the project co-ordinator is Anna Lynch for Ireland.
Learning from Families

Part I

What the Families Said
Section 1 Introduction

Home-Start International is an independent voluntary organisation, dedicated to supporting vulnerable families with children under five years through information exchange among governmental and non-governmental bodies. The organisation successfully completed a trans-national exploratory study supported by the European Commission’s Preparatory Actions to Combat Social Exclusion entitled “Tackling Social Exclusion in Families with Young Children” involving organisations in four countries from December 2000 – June 2002 (see www.home-start-int.org). That project highlighted gaps in knowledge about social exclusion, including the importance of the social and subjective dimensions of social exclusion and the need for deeper, more extensive listening to families; learning from their actual behaviour in response to policies and practices designed for their benefit.

Subsequently, Home-Start International secured funding under the European Commission Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion 2002 - 2006, Trans-national Exchange Programme for a second project to address the gaps in knowledge identified about social exclusion. Home-Start International coordinates the work of a partnership between Home-Start UK, Home-Start National Office Ireland, Home-Start Hungary and the Hellenic Council for Social Care. The overall aim of this project is to address policies and programmes from the point of view of families of young children themselves, particularly non or reluctant users of services, in order to help governments, statutory and voluntary bodies develop policies and build social environments that lessen the accumulation of risks, encourage protective buffers, and help families out of social exclusion.

The project is divided into three parts. Part I outlined the challenges facing policy makers and the key principles underpinning policy developments in the partner countries. It looked behind the National Action Plans against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2001 – 3 and 2003 – 5 at the rationale for the main policies to promote social inclusion in families with young children and what is thought to contribute to positive and less positive outcomes for families. Reasons why there is such limited attention to vulnerable families of this age group and the special measures available to them were explored as well as what this project could contribute. Part II, the second and main part and a focus of this report, aims to provide insight and understanding into the reality of social exclusion from the perspective of hard to reach families with children under five years of age and is the subject matter of this
report. It was agreed among the project partners that lone parenting would be a focal point for attention in Ireland. From this standpoint Part III (also a focus of this report) provides a practical framework to help policy makers to construct and assess more robust and appropriate family support policies and programmes and to implement existing policies more effectively to promote social inclusion in the target group. The focus is on families with young children due to the lack of social policy and needs awareness for this sector of society despite the evidence from numerous fields of study (for a review see Home-Start International, 2002) demonstrating the importance of the early years for future well-being and early intervention to break repeated generational cycles of social exclusion.

**An inquiry into the experiences of families with children under five years**

This report outlines how we conducted the inquiry, and includes the method chosen, the pilot, the interview schedule, the family reference group schedule, the family selection, the area selection and the special target group. What we learned from the families is explored, drawing from our work in the first project in relation to the dimensions of social exclusion. The risk factors that may have contributed and the protective factors of the families are considered along with their coping strategies. The process in and out of social exclusion is explored: the barriers; reasons for non use of services and the breaking and turning points that ultimately led families to accept help. Families’ experience and assessment of the support they received is examined. A reality check on the predominant themes that emerged are analysed and recommendations given.

**Section 2 How we conducted the inquiry**

It was agreed amongst the project partners to adopt a qualitative case-study approach followed by family reference groups subsequent to the analysis of the case studies revealing areas requiring further study. Ten case studies were conducted; within those a minimum of five focussed on an area of specific interest for each country - in Ireland that involved one-parent families. The strengths of this case study approach is that it provides for in-depth insight and comprehensive understanding of the experience of families themselves and allows for an exploration of relationships and processes in an attempt to unravel the complexities of the families’ situation. It must be acknowledged that given the small sample size that the findings may not be representative of all families, or indeed be generalisable to the population. However, even though each case is unique it is reflective of a broad
range of families with children under five, who are reluctant users of services and who were dependant on social welfare. In addition what was found in this study is borne out by similar studies in Ireland (NESF, 2001; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Loftus 2004; EU-SILC 2005). The use of family reference groups adds to our fund of knowledge.

There was much debate amongst the project partners regarding the actual instrument to focus the inquiry. The method must allow the respondent to freely articulate their views and to capture their voice while simultaneously allowing the interviewer to gather the information in a way that could be readily analysed and support trans-national exchange. Two different approaches were proposed: a highly structured interview schedule and one which invited more open-ended responses. Having piloted both approaches it was agreed to develop an interview schedule which combined having clearly identified items for discussion and flexibility to allow respondents answer spontaneously and develop points of particular interest to them resulting in semi-structured interviews. Careful consideration was given to the selection of the families. The following criteria applied:

1. Families targeted are those who are or who have been ‘hard to reach’.
2. Each family should have had at least one child less than five years at the time that they were/are ‘hard to reach’.
3. Each family should fall into at least three categories of the six dimensions of social exclusion.
4. Each family should experience one or more risk factors over and above the list of social exclusion indicators, where possible.

In Ireland the choice of families was left to the Co-ordinator of the Home-Start Project, Blanchardstown (see Appendix 3 for further information on the families and Appendix 4 for further information on Blanchardstown). This Home-Start, a home-based visiting service, was established in 1988 and has supported 246 families in the past 17 years with 60 families currently on the books. By sharing their time and friendship, volunteers from their own community offer families an opportunity to develop new relationships, ideas, skills and experience support. The approach varies according to the needs of each family which could include: being alongside parents

* When you see this symbol check Appendix 1 Operational Definitions
with post natal distress; supporting lone parents in the difficult job of child rearing; providing an extra pair of hands; encouraging families from other ethnic origins in meeting new friends; providing a break for the parents of children with physical or mental disabilities or accompanying the family on outings or appointments. The families visited, like the Home-Start volunteers, come from a wide range of educational, cultural and financial backgrounds.

Seven of the case study families are currently using the Home-Start service; three of the families have moved on but are still linked to Home-Start through friendship, occasional support and in one instance one of the respondents has returned as a volunteer. Their contributions are valuable as families who were hard to reach who have successfully moved on from the service and who would give us insight into the processes in and out of social exclusion. Including fathers in the case-study was a particular challenge as all of the Home-Start clients were female at the time of the interview process and because of the high proportion of one-parent families. Lone parents in Ireland are statistically more likely to be female (according to the Census (2002) eighty five per cent of lone parents were female, fifteen per cent were male). Nonetheless two fathers were interviewed with the mothers and reports relating to fathers were reviewed (McKeown, 2001; Cleary et al., 2004; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). It was decided amongst the project partners that it was inappropriate to engage children directly in the interviews, many of whom are babies and toddlers. Other studies (ATD Fourth World, 2004) have overcome this challenge by drawing on work reported in publications which included children as participants. In Ireland there are no participatory studies of the views of children under five years on social exclusion although studies undertaken recently (Border Counties Childcare Network, 2005; Centre for Social and Educational Research, forthcoming) demonstrates consulting with children in relation to their childcare settings. Parents were asked their views on the impact of their situation on their children. The geographical area was determined by the location of the Home-Start service in the greater Blanchardstown area in North County Dublin, which had the added advantage of being sufficiently large enough with a population of 70,027 (Census, 2002) to ensure the confidentiality of the families selected (see Appendix 4 for further area information/map).

Lone parents were chosen as the special target group, as they reflect the majority of families availing of Home-Start (fifty per cent) and are among the most vulnerable
groups in Ireland. According to NESF in 1987, one-parent households faced roughly the same risk of poverty as couples with children. Recent European figures (EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions, 2005) based on the last six months of 2003 reveal that one-parent families in Ireland are three-and-a-half times more likely than others to experience consistent poverty. Children living in lone-parent households showed the highest consistent poverty rate at thirty two per cent. Of the ten families interviewed it transpired that at the time of engagement with Home-Start eight were parenting alone; of those eight, two were in a serious relationship.

The interview process involved the interviewer initially meeting the individual families chosen by the Co-ordinator in the Home-Start office, explaining the process and the types of questions, enlisting their agreement and arranging dates to conduct the interviews (in two cases the initial contact was by telephone). All of the families agreed to be interviewed. Eight of the ten interviews were conducted in the family home, two were conducted in the Home-Start office; one because the respondent was temporarily out of home and it was the second’s preference. The interviews lasted from a minimum of one hour to a maximum of two hours and were held in October and November 2004. Observations and interview data were collected through field notes and tape recordings of the interviews where possible. Two out of the ten interviews were not recorded due to children playing with the recorder and the distortion caused by TV volume. The feedback was later transcribed to analyse the data. In this report thematic analysis was employed to present the responses and information succinctly; issues that have been identified twice or more by the families were collated and themed.

Themes arising from the case studies were further explored through two Family Reference Groups (FRGs). The Co-ordinators of Home-Start Blanchardstown, Home-Start Lucan and Home-Start Tullamore chose fifteen families to take part in the FRGs. One Group was hosted in Home-Start Blanchardstown and comprised of six families from Lucan and Blanchardstown. Lucan is a neighbouring urban suburb to Blanchardstown in West County Dublin. The second Group was held in Home-Start Tullamore and involved nine families who live in the rural midland town. Both FRGs were held in April 2005, lasted two hours and were facilitated by the interviewer with an accompanying note taker (see Appendix 2 Family Reference Group Schedule and Appendix 3 for Family Reference Group Information).
Section 3 What we learned from the families

3.1 The context of Social Exclusion

Drawing on our work in the previous project (Home-Start International, 2002) social exclusion is defined as a lack of social participation, with six distinguishing dimensions: low income, resources (material and cultural), employment and/or training, social networks, public services and the subjective experience of social exclusion. Families described how they fared with regard to these dimensions at the time of their introduction to Home-Start.

3.1.1 Low income: The following themes emerged while exploring income and living conditions. All of the families were dependant on the Irish social welfare system. All families reported that:

- their income was not adequate to meet their needs;
- indebtedness was common;
- income is supplemented by Child Benefit and Community Employment (CE) Schemes;
- they struggle with the cost of living and the particular costs of young children;
- families are without financial capacity for birthdays, emergencies or entertainment;
- there is a lack of free activities for families in addition to a lack of ability to socialise or have a holiday; and
- there are perceived difficulties with fathers paying maintenance for their children.

Those (the majority) in receipt of the One-Parent Family Payment (OPFP) alone fared particularly badly. As expressed by one parent “It’s very, very humiliating, trying to survive on the Lone Parents, it’s really impossible”. A second parent concurred “That’s only €151.60 a week. It’s ridiculous. You need to lead a normal life. You don’t lead a normal life in the situation I’m in”. Income is supplemented by Child’s Benefit: “that’s the only thing that bumps up your money once a month. But, even at that you probably owe from the weeks previous”. Indebtedness was a recurrent theme; most of the families (with the exception of one) owed money to the Credit Union, Kays Catalogue or legalised money lenders such as Woodchester, Premier Bank, R & P, or Provident; some families relied on their parents for loans. Debts range from €800 to €45,000. Christmas, birthdays, court fees, deposits on apartments for rent, times while waiting for benefits to be allocated, cars, pre-school

* When you see this symbol check Appendix 1 Operational Definitions
fees, and “just trying to get by” were among the items named that created the debt. Community Employment (CE) Schemes* were very much valued by the parents as a means to boost income; “when I was on CE schemes life became so much better. You could hold on to your Lone Parents book and your CE scheme was about probably a tiny proportion less than what your Lone Parents book was. So you’d actually get double income”.

The cost of living increase was commented on several times, “since the Euro has come in, the price of services, the price of food has gone up … I can’t shop in Dunnes and Dunnes is supposed to be reasonably inexpensive”. Despite this, food was prioritised in all the families who spent on average about €100 per week on food - “this comes before everything else for the kids”. Parents stated the particular costs of young children as a difficulty when on welfare. For example for a very young baby “SMA (baby formula) is €11 at the moment for 1 week, nappies are €10 for 5 days, baby wipes are €3 and solids are €3 for 6 days”. The cost of shoes “which they grow out of so fast” was commented on several times “he has a wide broad foot and high insteps, he can only wear certain shoes. His first pair of shoes cost €43 and he’ll only get about 5 or 6 weeks out of them”. There is no financial capacity for “birthdays”, “Christmas” or for emergencies “if the washing machine breaks then I have to pay to have that fixed myself. If the cooker breaks down, it’s the same thing; or the fridge”. A number of parents commented on the exorbitant food prices in the shops close enough to access (within a 20 minute walk with buggy). For instance one parent identified “bread is €2.10 here, but € 1.91 in the shops further away”. This parent has to get a taxi home from her weekly shopping (it is a 45 minute walk); “it costs €15, €10 for the cab and €5 for the shopping”. Lidl was mentioned a number of times favourably “thank God for Lidl because at least I can feel half normal walking into a supermarket. That’s where I would shop now, because I can feed my kids and I know what they’re getting is proper food”.

“Ninety nine per cent of anything you do costs money” was expressed by many frustrated parents. “All of the free things are miles away”. One parent invited the interviewer to “think of anything you might want to do - go to the pictures; to bring your kids bowling …its impossible - we go for all the free things”. It would cost one

* When you see this symbol check Appendix 1 Operational Definitions
family of three “€30 to go to the pictures”. Lack of ability to socialise or have a holiday was declared by all families. “I’m single, with not working and not socialising, I mean I wouldn’t go out for 6 months to a year at a time”. Another parent reported “I haven’t even had a weekend away”. Two of the parents had had breaks away in the recent past (3 months); the siblings of one paid for a weekend abroad and also babysat and the other break consisted of one night away for the first time in five years.

Frustration with the maintenance system was asserted. “They encourage people to take fathers to court (to pay for the maintenance of the child) but then the money is reduced, so you don’t get the benefit of it, but you do get a lot of hassle and bad feeling”. For example one parent used to pay €75 towards her rent allowance, however as soon as she got maintenance her contribution went to €164. Whereas she is grateful to have a roof over her head and is “allowed to keep €10 a month “as her “maintenance is means tested” she is struggling.

Two parents articulated what was said by many “I just think whoever decides what the allowances should be in this country, they’d want to look deep down, at what is actually happening and live the lives of those on social welfare” for “even a month” and then “let them decide what allowances people should have – really listen to families” who are experiencing hardship. “You don’t say ‘I think I’ll be a lone parent. That’s a great career. Have loads of kids and get the state to supplement me!’ It doesn’t work that way. It’s not a proper existence”. Ultimately parents want “for money not to be an issue; and to live a life of a decent standard”.

3.1.2 Resources: The inquiry into the families’ resources and ‘cushions’ revealed that there were no opportunities to save money or put anything by for a rainy day. Resources identified and themed included:

- the value of training and education;
- relationships, with the disincentive for couples to form relationships expressed;
- the need for secure accommodation, safe play spaces and recreational activities for children; and
- cars which were considered a resource because without them families would be trapped.

“I was literally living from week to week to pay the bills. I wouldn’t have had the chance (to save)”. This was reiterated many times. The one woman who had savings (€600) in the Credit Union felt she couldn’t access it as she owed money to the Union on a different account which “they would take - so I can’t win”. Those who had had
opportunities to train for example in art college, hairdressing or office management (through CE schemes) felt those skills could be utilised in the future. Some participants said that their relationships were a resource, one mother cited her parents as her only resource; a good friend was cited by another; a couple cited each other and the Home-Start Co-ordinator herself was cited by a fourth family. However, it was expressed that there is a disincentive for couples to form positive relationships with partners. In Ireland if a couple is co-habiting, one of whom is in receipt of the OPFP, the entitlement is lost if they are caught by a Social Welfare Inspector. Both of the men interviewed voiced that it is impossible for lone parents to marry. “It’s very hard for any family, particularly with a child, it just can’t work. We can’t get married – because she will lose all the benefits. We can’t afford to lose everything”. Even for couples who are both on social welfare, when they marry they lose approximately “€50 per week” in entitlements.

Two mothers (one who had experienced homelessness) felt having secure accommodation (through renting local authority housing) now offered stability. However all families wanted to move. Getting on to the Housing Waiting List* is significant for families in need of permanent accommodation; in addition families can only apply for rent allowance if they are on the housing list. Of those interviewed one couple is aspiring to buying their own house and tried to get on to the Affordable Housing List*. However, “in order to qualify for Affordable Housing, you need savings of €6,000. We were refused because rent (€300 which he pays for his own accommodation) wasn’t considered savings. They could save the €600/€700 with the €300 a month rent as he works. One family “was made come off housing list, because the (Social Welfare) Inspectors couldn’t gain access. They are supposed to ring – I had had a miscarriage and was in hospital and wasn’t there. I tried to look for the Inspector in advance. One occasion I was there but they didn’t ring me and now I have to appeal the case”. It was stated that “the only way to get a house these days is to live in a hostel with drug addicts for up to three years; a hostel is not a nice place to bring up children”.

At the time of referral to Home-Start children old enough were not allowed to play outside because of “roughness” of the other children, “toys being stolen”, and

* When you see this symbol check Appendix 1 Operational Definitions
“needles in the alleyways”. “It was much different when we were young. We could be out playing, he can’t; it’s not safe”. Many of the children are too young to be let out to play, but many families expressed concern over what their children were going to be doing in the future without access to “sports” and other “healthy activities”. “Football teams” are needed, “something to occupy the teenagers, to enhance their futures but also to stop being a threat”. Desire for a garden or at least access to a well tended, safe green space or play space within a 20 minute walk was expressed. “We want to get a back garden. So that he can go out, and not be confined indoors. Just to have that option”. All six families who did not have access to a safe, cleared back garden wanted one.

Half of the families had cars which they could ill afford, and which in some cases were uninsured but deemed necessary because of the lack of transport within in the area and the distances between the houses, shops, schools, Home-Start and other services.

3.1.3 Employment and training: While examining the employment situation of the ten case studies four of the mothers are currently either working part-time (two) or in fulltime education (two). However at their first engagement with Home-Start none of the families were in employment. All of the mothers were working before they became pregnant, in retail services, hairdressing, catering, office management or computer services. Parents were too exhausted, depressed or on medication to even consider working. Some had very young babies. Themes relating to employment and training were:

- wanting to care for their very young children;
- the desire to work part-time;
- the consequent need for affordable childcare;
- the experience of CE schemes; and
- the experience of the earnings disregard.

Some of the mothers got employment on CE schemes* (which involves part-time work for periods of 6 months at that time, later the schemes were extended to one to three years) or availed of the earnings disregard: where you could earn up to €146.50 per week and still maintain the OPFP, thereby allowing recipients to have an income of almost double that figure. Some of the CE schemes had community

* When you see this symbol check Appendix 1 Operational Definitions
crèches or were subsidised by Social Welfare. One parent described her situation when she had to use private childcare because one of the CE schemes had ended and concluded “it's really not worth it” she was unable to afford the childcare fees.

A second parent availed of the earnings disregard; this was a measure to support the transition of lone parents into employment and was intended to pay for “employment related costs” (Dept of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000) such as childcare. As she couldn’t afford childcare the only job she could take was packing shelves late at night, while her teenage sons minded the toddler. She would get home at 1:30am and then was up at 7:00am to get the rest of the children out to school. She lasted in the job for 13 months but in the meantime became very ill and was “worried” continually about “what her teenagers were up to” in her absence.

**3.1.4 Social networks:** The importance of social networks has been well documented (Burchardt *et al*., 1999; Home-Start International, 2002). Whereas many of the families had positive relationships with their own parents and siblings the following themes emerged:

- there is an inability of the extended family to help;
- there is dependency on parents for accommodation in the initial stages of parenthood;
- there is a lack of a social network;
- that for lone parents there is a need to have a phone to talk to other adults; and
- that families spend a lot of time indoors.

The inability of the extended family to help in some instances was due to ill health, others “lived a distance away”, some grandparents were unwilling to baby-sit but willing to help with the loan of money occasionally, or provision of food or nappies, and in some families help was very limited mainly due to an attitude of “get on with it” or they “have reared their children and don’t really have an interest in young children”. There was however dependency on parents for accommodation in the initial stages of parenthood; with the exception of three families who had poor relationships with their parents and one who was married, four families had lived with their parents, one until baby was a few months old and the remainder until the second pregnancy or birth. Lack of a social network at the time of engagement with Home-Start was evident in all of the families interviewed for a variety of reasons; “I had no contact then with any neighbours, I have forgotten a lot of that time I was so depressed”. One family had moved into the area and “knew no-one and I’d just be getting (verbal) abuse off him. So I was isolated totally and I was a target for him to
bully”. Some were in relationships that in themselves prevented engagement with friends and found their situation didn’t necessarily improve when the relationship had ended: “people thought ‘their problems are solved-he’s gone.’ I’d made such a hullabaloo about getting away from this man. And now that I’d got away from him, I still couldn’t cope”. Another woman who was in a violent relationship described how she avoided contact with people deliberately “you see because you spend your whole time trying to keep the big secret. You think you can keep it - but you don’t really”. One parent described her “morning time only social life”, through visiting Home-Start family mornings and a parent and toddler group.

The need to have a phone (although expensive) was highlighted spontaneously by three interviewees as this is their “only contact with the outside world”. Needing to talk to adults was considered very important; the fact that “when you are with particularly young children all the time you talk baby talk” was identified many times in addition to “you just need a decent conversation with an adult”. Sheer loneliness was expressed by many: “I have few friends who have children” or “I don’t really have any friends”. Spending a lot of time indoors was identified by all of the women, who live in private rental accommodation; “outside of these four walls, it’s hard to find outside contact. I’m in most of time here – we are miles away from the park”. “Otherwise (without Home-Start), I would sit in the house (all day)”.

3.1.5 Public services: Many people find it difficult to look for assistance from public services. All of the families struggled with looking for and accepting help. All of the families had been in receipt of some state benefit at the time of referral to Home-Start and were at the receiving end of public services. Recurring themes were:

- lack of information;
- unhelpful attitudes by public servants and conflicting information given;
- having to demean oneself to get assistance;
- distances to travel with poor public transport;
- queuing for lengthy periods;
- non return of phone messages; and
- positive experiences with public health nurses and voluntary services.

For one parent “it was impossible to ask for help, I felt ashamed and fearful. I really had no access to services because I didn’t know about them and even if I did I might not have taken it anyway or he (her husband) wouldn’t let me go. Complete lack of information was the problem combined with my situation”. Many parents concurred. Families that have joined Home-Start more recently were reasonably well informed
about their social welfare entitlements. However their main source of information was through word of mouth from others in a similar situation and all parents indicated that information from the state was not forthcoming. They had to “look for everything” which is not “easy with young children” when their “confidence levels” and “general health” were low. Some parents expressed difficulty with filling in forms and having to read leaflets. Many found that when they approached personnel in the social welfare offices they were not always helpful and gave conflicting information. This was particularly in relation to secondary benefits where there is an element of discretion on behalf of the Community Welfare Officer. Many of the mothers complained that they either had to “beg”, or “cry”, for what were their “rights”. Many had been tax payers and found it particularly hurtful to be treated so poorly. They “make you feel so low, as if you’re not worth it, as if you’ve never worked before when I had”. One parent remarked that “I went to Citizen’s Information. They’ve actually told me what my entitlements were but when you confront the Community Welfare, they tell you no. They don’t give you an explanation”. Distance, poor transport, having to go to the Welfare Office with a new born baby (having had a caesarean section), having to queue for lengthy periods, and non return of phone messages were all challenges to seeking help.

All families had come in contact with the Public Health Nurse and their General Practitioners and reported positive experiences. Other support services in the area were used by the families such as Barnardos (pre-school and toy library), the Child and Family Centre Castleknock (for psychological assessment and treatment), and Aistear Beo, (a therapeutic intervention centre for speech and language therapy); the Local Employment Services, Women’s Aid, Legal Aid, the Blanchardstown Area Partnership, the Citizen’s Information Bureau, the Money Advise and Budgeting Service, St Vincent de Paul (who provide a variety of supports to families in need, such as coal, food, toys, advise) and the Food Bank.

3.1.6 Subjective experience: How people feel about their situation are crucial indicators of social exclusion that give rise to political concern and demand different policy responses. Every case was unique; however there were some strong common experiences articulated by the families. Feelings of:

* When you see this symbol check Appendix 1 Operational Definitions
• isolation, worry, depression, exhaustion;
• overwhelming responsibility, which was unanimous amongst lone parents;
• lack of preparation and knowledge regarding being a parent;
• a lack of independence due to welfare dependency and a desire to shift from that;
• low self esteem;
• humiliation and degradation;
• intimidation and stigmatisation; and
• concern about the impact of the situation on their children.

Feelings of “isolation”, “loneliness”, “worry”, “depression”, and “worthlessness” were expressed. The feeling of overwhelming responsibility was unanimous amongst lone parents – “you have to be your own accountant, a cook, cleaner, carer and taxi service and everything else” – “I always have the child - twenty four seven”. That’s very hard, I think. You sort of say to yourself ‘when is there time for me?’ You get very frustrated”. Exhaustion was indicated several times due to the irregular sleeping patterns of young children. Frustration combined with a lack of preparation and knowledge “before you have children, or you get married, you would rely on parents for everything”. Feelings of intimidation were voiced regarding a variety of situations; being inspected by Social Welfare Officers; filling out forms and being a lone female parent and a target for young lads “anyone who was living on their own that hadn't got a partner or a husband were being victimised”. The desire to shift from welfare dependency and the consequent lack of independence was asserted many times; none of the families wanted to be on welfare - “it takes away your independence when you’re on benefits. It isolates you because you’re not around people when you’re caring for children and you’re certainly not being paid the salary you would have if you had a job. It’s the independence, that’s what I want back”. Low self esteem from abusive relationships was felt “I was wary, isolated, and my confidence was down”. Feelings of institutionalisation were expressed “you feel very confined in the house all day every day with a baby”. Families felt humiliated and degraded when having to live off Food Banks. “Everybody knows that you’re in that queue because you can’t afford to feed your children. Things like that breaks up the person’s spirit. It is good food, don’t get me wrong, but it’s not good enough to be sold in a shop. So if you were to think of it like that, what’s that saying about you as a person?”

Stigmatisation was identified unanimously – even though there was diversity in how families arrived in their situation “everybody is tarred with the same brush, but they don’t have a clue about people’s personal choice and life situations”. As commented on by one parent “I feel that society is judgmental, no matter where I went, a lot of places looked down on me because I was a single parent”. Anger directed at the
government and their situation was identified by all; although appreciation for shelter and gratitude to some Community Welfare Officers who “went out of their way to help” in so far as they could was also indicated.

3.1.7 Impact on children: Parents were asked what they felt was the impact of their situation on their children. Some of the parents had been referred to Home-Start through Aisteor Beo (a centre for speech and language therapy) and identified that their “children weren’t happy”. “They were withdrawn and quiet” particularly those living with violence - “it’s just that he totally went into himself and wouldn’t participate in school or with friends”. It was acknowledged that although the children were very young the stress and tension experienced in general by the parents negatively affected them. As one parent put it “I know the children are being affected because when I get really upset they tend to play up more; they’re not getting the attention they need. I’m actually getting to the stage now where sometimes it’ll just keep building up and building up before you know it I’ll just flip. Ash trays and everything start getting smashed – plates, cups, just so I can get it out”. Another parent felt similarly “I’m a very stressed out person, especially at the end of the month when the rent and everything comes in and the bills and all. I’m not going round happy, so if (the child) is screaming or he’s annoying me I’d roar more. And you feel very down and then you do look at your child and you say to yourself ‘how am I supposed to cope with all this’?”

Children’s health was affected; some children experienced asthma, eczema, and continual colds in some instance due to “dodgy heating” and “damp bedrooms”. The impact on one child was severe. The mother said that “the youngest child was...they described it as disturbed. She was pulling her hair out by the roots. They said it was because of the living situation. There was constant arguing”. This child had also failed to thrive and had to go through a year of physiotherapy to learn to crawl, walk, and speech therapy. The mother thought to herself “I'm doing this all wrong. What am I doing? This child, six years later, is “fantastic now”. A number of the parents had used anti-depressants and experienced detachment from their children; being “emotionally cut off from everything; anything could have happened”.

Inevitably children lost out on material possessions and entertainment; all of the parents described how their children “can’t have the things I’d like them to have, we are always short”. Those who are attending school cannot access after school
activities. When asked can her son play football one parent admitted “he’d be interested alright. But I couldn’t afford it really”. One parent mused on how “people are slipping through the net; not being able to cope, dysfunctional families rife with alcoholism, violence, drug abuse. Children are seeing this and a new cycle begins”.

3.1.8. Risk and protective factors: The families in this inquiry manifested many risk factors with reference to the individual, the social environment and the physical environment. All the risk factors for the ten case studies are presented in Table 1 Appendix 3 Family Information for the ten case studies. The following risk factors: poor mental health (as indicated by prescription of anti-depressants); financial poverty; unemployment; lack of childcare; poor education; feelings of discrimination; lack of social networks; physical remoteness (from Home-Start and other services); lack of public play spaces and poor transport are experienced by at least nine of the ten families.

The influence of risk factors can be reduced if protective factors are present in the child’s environment. The most protective factor is the social support of the parents. In our inquiry whilst we agree with governments that low income and low purchasing power are of fundamental importance in combating social exclusion, we argue that the nature and quality of personal and community relationships are the most powerful buffers or protective factors in helping people retain mental health. Money alone does not necessarily achieve this. Social support functions as a buffer that protects against the accumulation of risk factors. When assessing the families’ protective factors the following came to light:

- Home-Start itself which created and supported a social network, direct provision of parenting programmes, family mornings, crèche and links to other supports such as education and other voluntary services in the area;
- having a Public Health Nurse who was “interested” and followed up on families;
- a “sound (fair) Community Welfare Officer”;
- skills;
- having a “goal”;
- motivation to do the best for their children; and
- some support from extended family.

3.1.9. Coping strategies: When examining the responses to families’ coping strategies they fall into two broad categories; money management and personal development. It must be acknowledged however that some families felt they did not have any coping skills. As an example of this one parent declared “I’ve no idea (how I manage). It’s just like the same thing over and over again”.
All families’ incomes were (and in most cases still are) less than their needs, thus as described previously, families resorted to borrowing money and going to a lot of lengths to shop cheaply. People “just did without”. One woman who is currently in full time education described the following regular occurrence in her house. “I get paid on Thursday. You might have €2 and you’d have to go to Lidl because the bread is only 40 cent, even though it’s horrible bread but at least you know you’ll have bread. I’d have to do without electricity if it ran out because I’ve one of those budget meters that you put a card in. You’d have to do without electricity, even though its only €4, you know”. One parent outlined how she asks her family to “club together for birthday presents” for her to get her hair done.

Personal development was gained by those who have recently joined Home-Start learning valuable parenting skills through parenting programmes or individual advice regarding routines for their children, potty training and so on; others have developed coping skills through psychological support; “I learnt to decompartmentalise. My focus would be on what I was doing. If I was working, my focus would be on work. If I was with my child I’d focus on that. And that helps me to normalise my life”. Extended family helped some cope and in one situation the fact that the baby was “a good sleeper and a very placid baby; and then Home-Start came in” was stated.

3.2 The process in and out of social exclusion

This section examines the process in and out of social exclusion: the reasons behind families’ reluctant use of services; the breaking points that lead to their accepting help, the turning points that allowed them to accept help and their current circumstances through their involvement with services in addition to their aspirations for the future.

3.2.1 Process into social exclusion: Becoming a lone parent was not planned by any one of the families. People who were in long established relationships had had a different life plan in mind, which had involved a future together with children and combining work. However, of the nine lone parents: one discovered the father of her child was married; two were in violent abusive relationships; one’s partner was addicted to drugs; one was left by her partner; two experienced relationship breakdown and two are co-habiting with their current partners. Factors other than life events such as pregnancy or relationship breakdown contributed to the process into
3.2.2 Reluctant use of services: A variety of reasons was given for the families’ reluctant use of services and is closely linked to the subjective dimension relating to how they felt about their situation. Seven of the families felt that they worried they could be perceived as being unfit to care for their children prior to joining Home-start and that they “lived in fear that the children would be taken away”. As expressed by one mother “I was very depressed, isolated. I was afraid to say it in case people would think I was an unfit mother”. This particular woman was asked did her partner not notice - she commented “I would have hid a lot. I wouldn’t have said a lot. I slept most of the time. Before he’d come in, I’d get up and make sure the house was tidy, and make the dinner, so it looked all hunky dory”. This theme of feeling the need to hide a situation (feeling unable to cope but unable to admit their situation) was echoed by many. Embarrassment about their situation generally was expressed as identified by one but said by many others. “You feel like a waster, going up there. You don’t want anybody seeing you walking in to the Community Welfare Officer. I wouldn’t like anybody to know that. You feel embarrassed about it”. Many spoke of reluctance to being interviewed or completing forms.

Because the parents felt stigmatised they didn’t trust that the service they would attend would be non-judgmental or indeed would be staffed by people who would understand their situation. In addition they feared engagement with services would lead to a lack of privacy. Having been told about Home-Start this was the reaction of one reluctant user, which also encapsulates much of the themes, addressed above “it’s just so hard to admit you can’t cope. I was thinking – social workers are going to be involved; they’re going to be digging around; they’re going to know my business. I just had to admit that I was failing at what I was doing. Mothers are supposed to just know and be able to cope. And I’d say ‘no, I’m not having that. I can cope. I’ll get over it’. But I wasn’t going to get over it - the situation at home, my mental state, the depression, was getting worse and worse. I couldn’t function as a person”.

social exclusion; mainly poor education, consequently the inability to get well paid jobs and low self esteem. Parents didn’t always leave education by choice; in some instances they left school to work to augment their family of origin’s income. Others did not complete their education because it had no value for them; they didn’t feel confident or competent in school.
3.2.3 Breaking points: Although every family's circumstances were unique; at the time of engagement with Home-Start all were isolated, wary of services and felt unsupported. The breaking points that ultimately drove parents to accept help was as much to do with wanting the best for their children as the need to have some support for themselves. Accusations of instability and being an unfit mother directed at some parents prompted them to engage with services even though they felt vulnerable to having the children removed in addition to exhaustion combined with post natal depression, inexperience and lack of parenting skills in caring for their children on their own. As one parent said “I was at my wits end. The child hadn’t slept in two days and neither had I”. Many identified what one articulated “I was feeling so alone. It kind of feels isolated as if nobody else has ever gone through it before. It kills your self-esteem”. One parent depicted that “the kids were behaving badly and I wasn’t able to handle the fact that I was going to be a lone parent”. Yet another said “I was so down I wasn’t able to get up in the mornings”. For others the breaking point was an incident: an outbreak of violence directed at the mothers and in one instance a house fire due to neglect by the father.

3.2.4 Turning points: All of the families are involved with Home-Start and identified that engagement with the service was the first turning point. Home-Start in Blanchardstown offers family mornings and a drop in crèche* in addition to a visiting volunteer. In general the referrals for the case study families came to Home-Start through Aistear Beo* (a centre for speech and language therapy), the Public Health Nurse or Social Workers. As identified, parents were suspicious and wary of the service; thus the first point of contact between the family and the Co-ordinator was crucial. Persistence on behalf of the Co-ordinators was instrumental; involving several visits to the homes, and inviting and succeeding in facilitating parents to join the family mornings, physically bringing them if necessary. Once having met the families establishing trust seemed to create the first turning point in people in their engagement with services and creating social networks. Articulated by one but reiterated by many, this trust, “had been shattered through my communications with others”. Establishing trust takes time, as explained by one parent. “At first I was paranoid and thought she (the volunteer) was in the Secret Service! It would have taken me 6 or 8 months before I would’ve even opened up to her. I stayed with it

* When you see this symbol check Appendix 1 Operational Definitions
though because I enjoyed her coming”. Most families identified that it takes about 6 months before they felt they could “really be” themselves. The family mornings seem to create a non-threatening sphere where families had “chats” with the Co-ordinator and “started to make new friends”. Many of the parents had never left their child/ren “with anyone else before” and managed to do so in the crèche, “I think she (the child) was there about two months and she felt fine coming in, giving me a hug and off she went (into the crèche), I had trouble letting her go”.

As identified by one parent “it wasn’t so much ‘turning points’ as a series of steps”. These steps varied from family to family depending on their needs; having engaged with Home-Start - just getting there was significant. As one parent reported “usually what happens is that you’d drop your kids off at Home-Start and then you’d go off and do your shopping or whatever but by the time I’d get there I’d be so tired, I’d kind of hang about. I’d be really the only parent on-site but I’d get to sit down and have a cup of tea and sometimes I’d read. There’s always somebody in and out of the kitchen to chat to for a few minutes”. Accompanying people was also key to their engagement with the service as “it’s hard to go in anywhere for the first time on your own” voiced by one parent; repeated by a second.

3.2.5 The current situation: Enhanced parenting skills were declared by many of the families regarding their current situation. Direct involvement with Home-Start is one aspect of the process out of social exclusion for these families, links made to other agencies and services also attributed to the process. Attending self development, assertiveness courses and parenting programmes delivered in partnership with other organisations supported families to gain confidence and belief in themselves and inspired them to go on to further education. One parent’s experience reflects many others’. “I went back to school and did Maths and English. Home-Start rented premises and they told us what was involved and they asked a few of us if we wanted to do it and a few of us from Home-Start did. I completed the Junior Cert”. This parent has secured a permanent part-time well paid job with responsibility and asserted that “I wouldn’t have had the confidence before Home-Start to even think about going for something like that”.

This encouragement of people and genuine belief in them inspired and sustained mothers to join Vocational Training and Education Scheme (VTOS)† who then went

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† When you see this symbol check Appendix 1 Operational Definitions

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on to do their Leaving Cert and third level education. A combination of services has supported these women to undertake an enormous challenge to ultimately improve their situation. See Tables 1 and 2 Appendix 3 Family Information for their situation at the time of referral and the time of interview. However it is not accurate to say that their problems are sorted. They still have insufficient income to meet their requirements; they still must wait for the ill-timed delivery of student grant aid and they still struggle with childcare.

3.2.6 Aspirations: Despite these challenges families have great aspirations for themselves and their children. Some parents plan to return to education either to do the Leaving Certificate and then college, return to college or get a job. They do not plan or want to be dependant on social welfare for the rest of their lives. “I knew that if I do college now. I’ll be able to provide for them and the things they want to do like horse-riding lessons or they may want to learn how to play an instrument. They’re things I can’t provide for them, certainly not on Lone Parents. I’d like to think about a holiday, things like that”. Families want to move to “houses by the sea” or the “country” or just move location. Most of the families expect their children to attend college and all of them expect to see their children “complete their education” and “be happy”. Parents would not let their children “drop out” of education and “would aim to help their children achieve their goals”. All parents identified that they didn’t want “to be rich”. They just wanted to be “comfortable; to go to the shops and not think about prices of things”.

3.3 Interventions and assessment
Families assessed interventions that aimed to help families progress which could be broadly divided into voluntary and governmental services.

3.3.1 Voluntary services: Three voluntary services were used by two or more of the families, Home-Start was common to all and a number of families used Barnardos and Aisteor Beo. When asked how families would describe the help they received from Home-Start the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Home-Start was perceived unanimously to be the most helpful service overall even by those using other services. For one parent “it just opened a whole new world”. It was described by another as “a friend. A trusting, non-judgmental friend, with a listening ear, and that can give you a hand practically as well as emotionally”. The theme of Home-Start as a befriending service was echoed by the majority of parents. “She (the volunteer) was like a friend who wanted to be there – she wasn’t paid”. Another
parent affirmed that the Co-ordinator has “been like a substitute mum. She’s been great for listening”.

The flexibility of Home-Start is demonstrated by the fact that it was difficult to theme (an issue discussed twice or more) the actual help received. Universal supports valued by families are the family mornings and crèche mentioned in the previous section. At €5 per morning the crèche was acknowledged as very cheap but still a struggle for those on a low income. The crèche was appreciated as “it gives me a little bit of time for myself and helps my children to mix with other children”. In addition “they have social events and parties for the kids; you have a social life with Home-Start”. The fact that “parents’ mornings have helped me make friends and talk to other parents who are in the same position as myself without being judged and being able to get advice if I had a problem” was expressed by many. They also ran a parent’s programme. “Without them and Aisteor Beo, I would have never learned to manage and fully enjoy and appreciate my children. They have also given me back some of my confidence which I had lost due to past negative experiences”.

The Co-ordinators and volunteers operate as a sounding board for families. Parents feel they can “talk to them”. But Home-Start do not take over people’s lives, as explained by one parent the “approach is that is it is better for me to do things for myself, but to ask for guidance. She (the Co-ordinator) is like a safety net; you can sound off to her on things”. Another parent voiced what many had said “They told me I could do it. They had trust in me. They had belief in me”. The following response is from a parent who has moved on from Home-Start, but who was able to put in perspective what she had gained.

“At that stage, looking back, it would have made the difference between ending up going into an institution for mental health, or keeping my head above water. It gave me that confidence and self esteem to actually function as a person and as a mother and give the kids what they needed. They didn’t need big extravagant presents. They needed me to be able to listen to them and love them. I know money is very important to feed them your basic kind of needs but Home-Start give you a kind of view on life and you see people who aren’t coping and they’re from all walks of life. They’re not all lone parents that would be going to Home-Start. You’d have married women whose husbands are out working and trying to cope with probably twins, or who’ve got four kids under the age of five. You feel worthwhile. The first thing Home-Start gave me was the feeling that I was normal, that I’m not useless. I won’t get it right every time but I’m human and it’s ok to be human and make mistakes. Everything was a big huge deal for me; they put things in perspective for you. And the fact of sitting down with another adult and being able to talk, even if it’s about the weather or what happened in Coronation
One of the parent’s comments reflected similar circumstances; she had been prescribed tranquillisers and she felt that given another six months, without Home-Start, she would have taken them. For her, Home-Start is a “life-saver”. Parents have also identified that “small things can make a huge difference”. In one instance the volunteer is going to bring a parent to do her weekly grocery shopping; this means that that family have better possibilities for planning, routine and budgeting; in another a volunteer is going to visit in the evenings which the parent finds most lonely. The Home-Start Co-ordinator and the volunteers are a conduit between the families and other diverse services in the area continuing to support them in whatever way they can: be that accompanying parents to court, referring children to Barnardos or Aisteor Beo, finding information about back to education schemes, financial supports, assisting in the completion of forms, in some cases posting applications. Many of the families spontaneously said they would recommend Home-Start to anybody.

Barnardos is a voluntary childcare agency. Their pre-school service was highly regarded by those families whose children attended the service in Roselawn, Blanchardstown and the Toy Library in Mulhuddart. Barnardos is operating the High/Scope Pre-school Programme which was particularly valued. “The teachers are very good. They’d always tell me what’s going on with the kids. I’ve asked, because they do planning and reviewing, how I can do that at home; how I can follow what’s going on for the two hours that they are there. Because they’ll (children) say to me ‘oh I have to put in my plan tomorrow that I want to play with the dolls’ and that kind of thing; they really are improving with it”. Barnardos operates a bus service to this particular centre which is also valued by parents as the distances are too great to attend without transport. Aisteor Beo an organisation which provides speech and language therapy and counselling was also valued. As one parent articulated her child “was frustrated; now he can communicate better”. Places in Home-Start, Barnardos and Aisteor Beo are limited; some parents expressed frustration regarding this and the lengthy waiting lists for assessment in Aisteor Beo.
3.3.2 Government services: Regarding social welfare supports, eight out of the ten parents wanted to work outside the home. Three main barriers to going back to work or education were identified: the cost of childcare, the loss of benefits employment brings and the need for sympathetic employers. This is particularly true of families living in private rented accommodation; “if you earn €5, euro for euro it’s taken away in rent allowance or maintenance – it doesn’t make sense to work and there is the extra cost of childcare”. “Since government does not provide childcare it’s just not worth your while. You’d have less money going back to work than what you’d get when you’re not working. The cheapest childcare for fulltime is roughly about €200 a week and that’s for one child”. There is also a need for flexible employers. CE Schemes were identified as good opportunities for people to “learn interview skills” get “great experience”, which offered flexibility. “I didn’t get away with things. It wasn’t like I didn’t have to do my job. I did have to do my job but she (the employer) was more aware of my situation so she was more tolerant of me than what say a normal employer would be”.

There is insufficient financial support for those on the Back to Education Allowance. For two families who are in fulltime education the Allowance is the same as they were getting on social welfare; and they are struggling. One parent eloquently described the situation.

“It is great that you can go back now as a mature student to university, but financially, especially when you’ve got a family, it’s a disaster - you need help. Where I go, you can’t even bring your food in with you to the most convenient restaurant. I’ve to go to one a good distance away in the Campus, but I don’t always have time to get there. Being in college costs so much money between travelling, food when you’re out in placement, books, and parking. This particular placement charges €20 euro a week for parking even for students. It’s not possible to come up with that kind of money. I’ve got into a lot of debt this year. I did apply, for a Hardship Fund and I got €300, it helps me out because Christmas time is very difficult; you’ve never got any money. My oldest son minds my seven year old after school - I’ve no choice - how could I pay childcare out of the €120 a week. Realistically, I got a quote last year for childcare across the road, near the school, and it was €120. So the reality is with five children I’d have no money to live on if I had to pay that. You’re caught in a catch 22 situation. My older son is now looking for a job and my seven year old is too young to be on his own, it has me stressed out with worry over what I’m going to do. But I look forward to the day when that’ll all be over and I’ve got a good job”.

The following represents assessments by the parents which ultimately require timely delivery of benefits and entitlements. "The back to school clothing and footwear* allowance which is €80 and in itself is not enough to cover the uniform which is €140 not including runners and shoes, and the Arts and Crafts bill for school is €80. The
allowance isn’t available until the end of September; it should be available in August before the children go back to school". In addition "you are not entitled to the money for a cot until the baby is 6 months old". One final point was raised regarding means testing which is that the assessment should be “on everything at the same time”. “If government are agreeing to give support to people; let them know their rights. The State is giving it to the people who need it at that time”.

Section 4 ‘Reality check’ through the family reference groups

It was agreed among the project partners that the FRGs would not provide a primary source of information for the project but would ‘test’ out the themes and issues that had been suggested by the families in the national reports about how they experience the policies and programmes intended by government to help them (see Appendix 2 for the prompts). Recommendations were made which are augmented with those in Section 5. The main themes to be explored that emerged from the national reports were:

- Work/life reconciliation/attitudes to employment, training and staying at home…
- Benefits and getting by…
- Services and delivery of services…
- Family support …

4.1 Work/life reconciliation/attitudes to employment, training and staying at home:

There was complete congruence between the case study families and the FRGS: the desire to work part time; the negative impact of working on benefits for those living on social welfare particularly lone parents; the lack of affordable childcare, and the importance of training. There was also some debate on the value of rearing children. Both groups were almost unanimous in their desire to work outside the home at least part time. Out of the fifteen women, three worked part-time. When asked what was stopping them from working, the responses again were unanimous and concurred with the views of the case study families; for lone parent families ultimately “the cost of everything, rent allowance, travel, child care, I would lose all my benefits and I could not afford to pay for everything else”.

The costs of childcare are a barrier to accessing work. For those living outside of Dublin, the costs of childcare were still prohibitive although considerably cheaper than in the city "its €25 a day for childcare, over a week that’s too expensive. If you want to work in retail the hours are not compatible with childcare hours, there’s no childcare available for evening work or weekend work”. “As a lone parent I prefer not
to be on social assistance but then you have the cost of crèche - you are working to pay the crèche”.

The issues of training and the opportunity to gain skills emerged. “You need to do training to get a good job, I’ve done college, but I still need to retrain”. For lone parents some schemes such as VTOS and CE schemes were valued. One parent in Dublin sadly “had gone back to VTOS (back to school Leaving Cert). I got pregnant and I was very sick but I had to pay for childcare while doing VTOS and the government cut all my allowances”. In Tullamore there are some courses available but are inaccessible without childcare; the impact of the removal of a crèche allowance was also experienced negatively here. This crèche allowance has been reinstated but it is more limited.

Some concern was expressed over the pressure on women to work outside the home and the lack of value that working at home caring for children has in our society. There was agreement about the responsibility of parenting and the “never-ending” nature of it, without a “break built in” particularly for lone parents.

4.2 Benefits/income and getting by: Regarding families’ incomes again similar themes to the case study families were reported: income inadequacy; the high cost of living combined with the particular costs of young children; lack of financial capacity for emergencies or entertainment and indebtedness. New themes such as medical costs; the sacrifices parents make; the unfairness of thresholds beyond which families are ineligible for benefits; and the length of time to become eligible for schemes also emerged.

Medical costs were an issue as not everyone was in receipt of a medical card. “My two boys have been sick, it is costing a fortune in doctors, paying out the whole time” was reported by one parent while another pointed out that “expense of doctors means you can’t afford other things like preschool”. The proposed ‘doctor only’ card was welcomed for those parents who are not in receipt of benefits and for those families that have only one parent working. However “there is an income limit on it”.

* When you see this symbol check Appendix 1 Operational Definitions
For those who have a medical card loosing the benefit when people returned to work was feared.

The threshold set for receiving benefits for low income families was problematic “me and my husband were €9 short of getting a grant of €500 before birth of my baby and €200 after the birth – the cut off was €9 for us”. This money was badly needed. Regarding the length of time to become eligible for schemes “you have to be on unemployment assistance for 5 years before you can go on a ‘back to work scheme’.

One theme emerged in the groups that was not overtly evident in the case studies and that was the sacrifices families make for their children. Regarding medical costs; “I put off going to the doctor myself because I can’t afford it”. There was general consensus from the group on this. Others said they “go without food” themselves in order to feed their children.

4.3 Services and delivery of services: Similar experiences were reported by both groups. The women from the Dublin area spoke of a lack of information, misinformation and mistiming and lack of coordination between one social welfare office and the next in the case of families who moved location; difficulties in paying rent in advance of receiving rent allowance and the feeling of degradation while seeking help. Families had dealt with supportive Welfare Officers and Social Workers, however “you find out information on the street or someone sitting next to you in the queue, when you go up to the counter the person won’t tell you what you are entitled to”.

There is a dearth of services generally in Tullamore. Lack of a hospital and the consequent expense and time to travel to neighbouring towns of Portlaoise and Mullingar was related: “we have no hospital and nurses are under pressure – even getting ante natal classes is difficult, there is going to be a new hospital but this does not have a maternity wing”. Tullamore does not “have even a town or community hall”. Community resource centres are rare, only one was known about in the group of nine people and it was inaccessible to that particular family because of the distance to travel.

Hardship was endured when for example a rent allowance approval didn’t come through on time and families lost access to favoured houses. Because the rent allowance is paid by Social Welfare a month in arrears, as opposed to a month in
advance it is difficult for families to move into new accommodation. Quite often it was the start of families getting into debt; borrowing to pay the rent in advance.

**4.4 Family support:** Families described their experiences of Home-Start as a community based, non-threatening, confidential family support service. Families valued the practical help and support particularly as “the family is totally devalued in this society now”. One mother described how she was “terrified as to how I’d cope with a fifth child”. She felt “guilty” and that she “should be able to manage”. The volunteer came once, sometimes twice a week. She’d hold my baby while I’d have a shower and help me to collect the kids”. Home-Start was identified as offering a range of help “small things, but huge at a particular time in your life”. The isolation that “a non Irish person” feels was expressed by one international family. “If you don’t speak English you don’t know who to call for information”. For another international family “my Public Health Nurse told me about Home-Start, it was just 3 minutes from my home and I had not known about it”. This particular woman had not been outside the door since she arrived in Ireland. “The Co-ordinator would come and take me out – coffee shops etc, now I tell the kids you go to bed early because tomorrow we are going out – it is a very special day”. The “social and educational element” of Home-Start and the opportunities for children to socialise were valued. One woman identified how just “sitting and talking is such a great help”. There was complete agreement on this with the pronouncement that “loneliness is measurable – you can see people walking around like zombies”.

**Section 5 Discussion, recommendations and conclusion**

The Republic of Ireland is the first EU member-state to complete the European Survey on Income and Living Conditions. The data (released January 2005), collated by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for the latter half of 2003, will be used to monitor and evaluate progress towards achieving the targets set out in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). The Survey has revealed the crucial need to reform the current supports which are in place for lone parents: 49.3 per cent of female headed lone parents are at risk of poverty in comparison with 23 per cent of the population overall; 33 per cent of lone parents live in consistent poverty in comparison with 9 percent of the population overall. Lone parents scored the highest levels on each of the eight deprivation indicators in the survey (confirmed by the experiences of the case study families): 33 per cent were unable to buy new clothes; 33 per cent experienced debt; 24 per cent went without heating at some stage within
the preceding year and 22 per cent could not afford daily rations of red meat, fish or poultry.

One Family specify the particular relevance of the escalating cost of childcare for pre-school age children and the lack of available childcare. Many parents are paying up to €800 a month. It does not make economic sense for lone parents with pre-school aged children to return to work, in particular those who are in receipt of rent allowance as for every euro earned one euro is deducted from their welfare allowance. One Family suggests that policy should meet the individual needs of all families and respect family diversity. Family Impact Statements recommended by the Commission on the Family (1998) could routinely assess the impact of all policies on families to avoid any future negative consequences for family well-being.

Men have a crucial role in their children’s lives and active fatherhood should be proactively supported (McKeown, 2003; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004) where possible. Further it has been identified that young fathers are becoming increasingly marginalised outside the home (Cleary et al.). The potential for positive relationships to develop is impeded by two aspects of the social welfare system. Firstly the non-individualisation of welfare payments results in a reduction in benefit for social welfare recipients should they become a co-habiting or married couple. And secondly where maintenance payments are successfully secured the net benefit to the family financially is diminished by reduced allowances and emotionally is reduced by the stress associated with the process.

In addition to having insufficient income to meet their needs, the ten case studies were lacking in social networks and social resources to sustain themselves in times of crisis and manifested a high number of risk factors. Prof J. Hermanns identified (Home-Start International, 2002) that programmes that provide a buffer are most supportive of families. These programmes are not aimed at interfering or reducing risk factors that are present in a family, but at the reinforcement of protective factors. He advocated that interventions should be oriented more often at the support of people – thereby offering them “friendship and joy – instead of intending to teach people to behave differently”. Home-Start operates as that buffer providing emotional support and practical help. Home-Start has provided the space for pre-development relationship building with families; regaining people’s confidence and trust through friendship and encouragement in addition to supporting them practically to achieve goals, finding information, advocacy or referring families on to other services. The
case study families who are now employed or in fulltime education were supported through a combination of many agencies and services coming together providing self development courses, education and work experience on Community Employment Schemes all triggered by engagement with Home-Start.

A range of options regarding reform of the OPFP is being studied by a high-level group of officials from a number of government departments who will report to the Minister in the coming months. Suggestions such as a two-tiered system of targeted child benefit along with the removal of disincentives to couples co-habiting or marrying have been announced and given a cautious welcome by family support organisations. The Budget 2006 offers increased social welfare payments and an increase of the upper earnings income for the One Parent Family Payment by €82 per week to a new limit of €375 which is particularly welcome and is certainly an indication of progress. It is hoped that not only the hard economic objectives, but also the social and subjective dimensions of social exclusion will be supported. In a recent OECD (2004) report it is acknowledged that family support and information services are weak in Ireland. The National Economic and Social Council (2005) report argues that the single most important route to improving social protection is the through development of public services. The core structure of a "developmental welfare state" would be based in three overlapping areas: services, income supports and activist measures, such as focused work by community groups. The report also emphasizes the need for an end to the protection of territories by different government departments and authorities with regard to delivering social services.

Recommendations

To enhance the process out of social exclusion for vulnerable families with children less than five years of age, the case study families and the reference group families themselves recommend the following.

Regarding income, benefits and getting by:

- Increase all social welfare payments ensuring an adequate income for all families particularly lone parents.
- Remove financial disincentives to developing relationships by individualising benefit and entitlement.
- Raise the threshold for allowances for families on low incomes and "tax those on higher incomes".
- Alleviate the cost of living by developing “standard school uniforms of different colours, available cheaply, a standard uniform allowance for everybody (should be introduced) or cut out special uniforms".
• Free delivery of shopping to homes would alleviate some expenditure and overcome the lack of transport which is difficult particularly with young children and buggies.
• Provide medical cards for young people up to 18 years for all families
• “Women who choose to stay at home should be financially recognised for this”.
• Reduced indebtedness by: speedy processing of any social welfare applications; and timing of payments to meet the intended need; rent allowance to be paid in advance rather than in arrears; increase government regulation of banks, money lenders and credit card companies who entice debt by offering “more and more credit”.

Regarding resources:
• Provide and make accessible recreational facilities such as “playgrounds, football pitches, pools and youth centres”.
• Provide frequent available “public transport”.
• For those who choose not to work “drop in centres would be great for parents who stay at home, to give them a break”.

Regarding training, employment and work/life reconciliation:
• Support back to education initiatives with specialised assessment of individual circumstances in order to maximise benefits.
• Increased adult education courses with childcare should be made available.
• A minimum of six months parental leave for mothers and fathers was recommended, in addition to “family friendly working policies”.
• Continue to develop more “high quality, affordable, state supplemented childcare” and facilities but combine with financial supports to facilitate those on low incomes to return to work and or education.
• Add “childcare to the list when plans for infrastructure are being developed” such as roads, shops, and schools.
• Professionally qualified asylum seekers “should be given work permits – social money is limited, we are sick and tired of it, we want to work”.

Regarding public services and service delivery:
• Train workers in public services to develop a client based approach – which would be non-judgemental, respectful, trusting and co-ordinated.
• A centralised universal system of information dissemination should be developed which is easily accessible, and available. Information should be given as a right “when your child is born you should be given information on all the support services, resources etc”. Families should be targeted during pregnancy. Materials should be multi-media. Several ways of improving the dissemination of information were suggested including:
  o attractively presented information booklets or a cd should be given to “every parent” (not all parents get information) in the maternity hospitals, which would contain information not just about social welfare benefits but also about local services;
  o a person should be employed to explain rights and entitlements to a new parent preferably through a phone call;
  o a phone-in helpline should be developed;
  o the Citizens Information Centres and the internet should be better utilised.
Regarding **family support**:

- Families and the role of parenting should be valued more in society.
- Community based, non-threatening, home-visiting confidential services such as Home-Start should be “available in every community”.
- The priorities for Government spending should be re-assessed with greater resources given to the development of family support services including recreational facilities generally.
- “Home-Start should be given more financial supports so they can be available for parents” and to allow it to “expand”.

**Conclusion**

In order for hard to reach families on low incomes to access training, education or employment there is a clear need for: attention to improving the social support network through the development of community based services; a substantial increase in social welfare payments (particularly for lone parents); increased paid parental leave; addressing the cost and availability of childcare for those families that want to work combined with flexible working arrangements.

Removal of financial penalties inherent within the social welfare system triggered by couples co-habiting, securing maintenance payments and earning an income while on rent allowance also deserves attention. Family Impact Statements which would routinely assess the impact of all policies on families should be introduced for each proposed law or policy.

As identified in our proposal for this project and has been proven in this inquiry family support services can bring about change by engendering a sense of hope, facilitating access to services and improving parental capacities and skills. Given the aspirations of the families in the ten case studies there is hope that the cycle of disadvantage may be broken. Overall, Ireland has one of the lowest levels of social protection expenditure in Europe (16.5 per cent of GNP, compared to an EU average of 27.3 per cent). If we really want to make a difference to families experiencing poverty we need higher social protection expenditure, higher social welfare expenditure, more services and greater equality in the areas of health and education.
Learning from Families

Part II

A Practical Framework
About the Framework

This framework is a practical tool for policy makers and those who deliver policies and programmes. It is designed to bring into focus some of the issues from the perspective of socially excluded families with whom service providers find it difficult to engage.

It is based on a family enquiry that took place in Ireland within the context of the transnational project “Learning from Families”

“Policy makers are very far removed from people”, a parent said; “Will our words have any meaning to those that make decisions?” asked another.

This practical framework aims to connect in a direct way what the families said and what those who Plan and Deliver policies and programmes should think about and act upon. The framework should be viewed as a tool to promote lateral thinking and action. The framework consists of three different guidelines:

“Guidelines 1” addresses those who plan policies and programmes. The issues raised by parents are organised in categories that relate to aspects of family and socio-economic policies whose objective is combating poverty and social exclusion.

“Guidelines 2” addresses those who deliver policies and programmes. The issues raised by parents are organised in categories that relate to the ways policies are implemented and programmes are delivered, which often create a barrier between the service and its recipient, leading to service exclusion.

“Guidelines 3” addresses both those who plan and deliver policies and programmes. The issues raised refer to principles of good management that perhaps are well-known but often forgotten. The issues were not all directly raised by parents but, in many instances, were implied in our discussions with them.

Parents, in a vivid and often heart-touching way, provide a clear picture of the difficulties they experience in their everyday life. Many policies and services are experienced as “non-family friendly” and parents point out where there are gaps and inefficiencies. They also provide ideas and suggestions on how to improve the situation.

It is possible and important to listen to parents: if asked they are not only willing to share their experiences and opinions but ready to contribute to the policy making process by fully elaborating the issues. The crucial factor is the cooperation between individual parents, the Non Governmental Organisations (NGO’s) and the governmental bodies.

Please listen to what parents say, think about it and act. You can make a difference.

The project team

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1 Transnational Project “Learning from Families- Policies and Practices to Combat Social Exclusion in Families with Young Children” (European Programme to Combat Social Exclusion 2002-2006 - Transnational Exchanges)
How to use the Framework

“The Framework is a tool for reflection and action”

This box is about parents’ experiences.

We have not changed the parent’s wording here at all – they tell you very frankly how they feel.

This box – and the one below – refer to policies and programmes. The temptation may be to “tick boxes”, i.e. answer all the questions positively and feel contented that you have all the policies and programmes right. But this is not the purpose!

This box is intended to be thought provoking and prompt you to think about how far your policies and programmes go and about the way they are delivered:

- Do they include all the families that need them?
- Are they really effective? Do they make a difference in the lives of those that receive them?
- Are they known, accessible and acceptable to those whom they are meant to address?

This box invites you to examine the evidence on which your answers above are based.

First, there is hard evidence based on statistics.

Second, there is the ‘soft’ but crucial evidence which stems from the parents’ experiences and highlights possible inefficiencies and gaps in policy formation and delivery.

We recommend that you pay special attention to the latter kind of evidence. You are urged:

1. To consider incorporating parental consultation into your policy making and assessment
2. To address how you can include the views of parents that do not usually participate in such processes.

This is the action box!

If you have identified gaps and inefficiencies in your policies programmes and practices, or in the evidence on which you base them, think about what you should do about it. Prioritise and act. Don’t forget: you can make a difference.
Guidelines 1: For those who plan family policies and programmes

1. Think about the content, effectiveness and coverage of income support policies and programmes for families

What parents told us about income and consumption…

“Without Lone Parents Allowance and Rent Allowance I’d be out on the streets.” However, “It’s very, very humiliating, trying to survive on social welfare, it’s really impossible” “I am always in debt”

What parents suggested…

“They should increase the amount of social welfare and children’s allowances” “We need regulation of money lenders and banks to stop them preying on vulnerable families” “I just think whoever decides what the allowances should be in this country, they’d want to look deep down, at what is actually happening and live the lives of those on social welfare” for “even a month” and then “let them decide what allowances people should have – really listen to families”

What policy-makers should think about…

Do you have an adequate income support policy for all families in need?

- Are you sure that it does not exclude any families in need?
- Are you sure that it corresponds to real needs and to accepted poverty lines? Are you sure it does not create a poverty trap?
- Are you sure that benefits are fairly distributed amongst different kinds of families?
- Are you sure that income support is fairly distributed within the families themselves?
- Do you know that a significant number of families are in debt? How are you helping these families and/or those who find it hard to manage money?

What do you plan to do to improve the situation?

1. ………………
2. ………………
3. ………………

How do you know that you have an adequate income support policy?

- What evidence do you have (statistical or other) that answers the above questions?
- Have you consulted with the families themselves, particularly the most poverty stricken and/or hard to reach?
Guidelines 1: For those who plan family policies and programmes

2. Think about the resources (savings, housing, property and skills) available to families

What parents told us about their resources...

“I was literally living from week to week to pay the bills. I wouldn’t have had the chance (to save).”

“It was much different when we were young. We could be out playing, he can’t; it’s not safe.”

“It’s very hard for any family, particularly with a child, it just can’t work. We can’t get married – because she will lose all the benefits. We can’t afford to lose everything”.

What parents suggested...

Speedy processing of any social welfare applications; and timing of payments to meet the intended need”

“Sports and other healthy activities are needed, something to occupy the teenagers, to enhance their futures but also to stop them being a threat”

“Remove financial disincentives to developing relationships”

What policy-makers should think about...

Do you have policies that secure a minimum level of resources to all families and do you provide an environment of economic stability so that family resources are not eroded?

- Are you sure that your housing policies are adequate and include all families in need? Do you have policies of temporary accommodation for emergency cases? Do they cover all families in need?
- How do you ensure that families, particularly the socially excluded ones, have the means to obtain and maintain basic property resources?
- How effective are your policies in reaching out with education and training to alienated and hard to reach parents?

What do you plan to do to improve the situation?

1. ………………. 
2. ………………. 
3. ………………. 

How do you know that you have adequate policies that secure stability and a minimum level of family resources?

- Do you have evidence (statistical or other) that answers the above questions?
- Have you consulted the families themselves, particularly the most poverty stricken and socially excluded?
3. Think about the employment situation of family members

**What parents told us about employment...**

"I got the best experience ever on the Community Employment schemes; I was working in an office - as assistant to a manager, organising budgets, with lots of responsibility."

"As a lone parent I prefer not to be on social assistance but then you have the cost of a crèche. You are working to pay the crèche"

“You need to do training to get a good job, I’ve done college, but I still need to retrain”

Professionally qualified asylum seekers say “social money is limited, we are sick and tired of it, we want to work”.

**What policy-makers should think about...**

Do you have policies on employment and reconciliation between work and family that address family needs?

- Do you have employment policies that specifically help mothers with young children to find (flexible and family-friendly) employment? How effective are such policies?

- Do you implement specific measures that enable all parents to work and at the same time enjoy being with their children (i.e. number of places, conditions of acceptance and operating hours of care facilities, parental leaves, operating hours of services etc)?

How do you know that you have adequate employment and work-life balance policies?

- What evidence do you have of the impact of your policies with regard in particular to socially excluded parents with young children?

- How do you ensure that you know the views of such families?

**What parents suggested...**

CE Schemes were identified as good opportunities for people to “learn interview skills” get “great experience”, which offered flexibility

“We want flexible work and good quality, affordable childcare”

“Support back to education initiatives paying attention to individuals’ circumstances”

Professionally qualified asylum seekers “should be given work permits”

**What do you plan to do to improve the situation?**

1. ..................................

2. ..................................

3. ..................................
4. Think about how families feel about their situation; think about the support available to them

**What parents told us about how they feel...**

“They make you feel so low, as if you’re not worth it, as if you’ve never worked before when I had”

“You feel like a waster (signing on). Going up there, you don’t want anybody seeing you walking in to the Community Welfare Officer. I wouldn’t like anybody to know that. You feel embarrassed about it.”

“Loneliness is measurable—you can see people walking around like zombies”

As a lone parent “you have to be your own accountant, a cook, cleaner, carer and taxi service” – “I always have the child - twenty four seven. That’s very hard, I think. You sort of say to yourself ‘when is there time for me?’”

**What policy-makers should think about...**

**Do you have a policy of long term and short term social support for those families who need it?**

- What kind of social and emotional support policies are there? How far do they cover all families in need and how effectively?
- To what extent are you mindful of the value of preventative services, especially in relation to psychological/mental health needs and early years intervention?

**What do you plan to do to improve the situation?**

1. ..................
2. ..................
3. ..................

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**What parents suggested...**

“Every community should have a Home-Start: A trusting, non-judgmental friend, with a listening ear, and that can give you a hand practically as well as emotionally”

“We need more family support services for children and parents”

One woman identified how just “sitting and talking is such a great help”

**How do you know that you have an adequate policy of social support for families?**

- How do you ensure that consultation includes families who find it hard to communicate with those ‘in authority’?
- Do you have evidence (statistical or other) that answers the above questions?”
Guidelines 2: For those that deliver policies and programmes that support families

5. Think about how aware families are of policies, programmes and services

What parents told us about their awareness of policies, programmes and Services

“You find out information on the street or someone sitting next to you in the queue, when you go up to the counter the person won’t tell you what you are entitled to”

“I really had no access to services because I didn’t know about them”

What those who deliver policies, programmes and Services should think about

Are your Services known to almost all members of the local community?

- How do you ensure that the information about the Services is widely disseminated?
- How do you ensure that the most marginalised members of the community are informed about the Services and what they offer?

What do you plan to do to improve the situation?

1. 
2. 
3. 

What parents suggested…

“Attractively presented information booklets or a cd should be given to every parent in the maternity hospitals, which would contain information not just about social welfare benefits but also about local services”

“A person should be employed to explain rights and entitlements to a new parent preferably through a phone call”

How do you know that your Services are known to almost all members of the local community?

- Are you distributing information door to door? Are you using any other effective ways of disseminating information?
- Are you using methods other than the written word in first language to reach families who may have reading difficulties or language problems?
- Have you consulted the families concerned?”
Guidelines 2: For those that deliver policies and programmes that support families

6. Think about how accessible Services are to families

What parents told us about their accessibility to Services

- “The citizens’ advice centre is upstairs in the centre, this is not accessible with buggy and they have unfriendly hours”
- “It costs €15 just for the taxi for me to go shopping, €10 for the cab and €5 for the shopping.”
- “We have no local maternity or paediatric services”

What parents suggested....

- “Services should be easily accessible, easy available with a variety of information”
- “Plan housing estates with shops and crèches and services”
- “We need local maternity and paediatric services”

What those who deliver policies, programmes and Services should think about.....

Are your Services geographically close to families that need them?

- How do you ensure that the location of your services is easily accessible to families, particularly to those with small children and/or with a disability?
- What means do you use to facilitate families in their access to your Services (i.e. special transport arrangements, mobile services)?

What do you plan to do to improve the situation?

1. 

2. 

3. 

How do you know that you have an adequate policy of social support for families?

- How do you ensure that consultation includes families who find it hard to communicate with those ‘in authority’?
- Do you have evidence (statistical or other) that answers the above questions?
Guidelines 2: For those that deliver policies and programmes that support families

7. Think about how acceptable policies, programmes and services are to families

What parents told us about the acceptability of policies, programmes and Services...

“It is not out of their own pocket but that is how they treat you. You really would have to beg”

“You have to beg, or cry, for what are rights.

What those that deliver policies and programmes should think about.....

Are your Services well accepted by the families of the local community, including the less vocal?

- How do you ensure that your Services are family-friendly, meet the needs and include the most marginalised?
- How do you prepare and supervise your staff to reach out to those who do not easily avail themselves of your services?

What do you plan to do to improve the situation?

1.
2.
3.

What parents suggested...

‘Workers in public services should be trained to develop a client based approach – non-judgemental, respectful and trusting.”

What those that deliver policies and programmes should think about.....

Are your Services well accepted by the families of the local community, including the less vocal?

- How do you ensure that your Services are family-friendly, meet the needs and include the most marginalised?
- How do you prepare and supervise your staff to reach out to those who do not easily avail themselves of your services?
8. Think about the principles and methods of intervention of Services

**What parents told us about the principles and methods of intervention of Services...**

“You have to go up every week initially and sign on then monthly, this is very degrading”

“I went to Citizen’s Information. They’ve actually told me what my entitlements were but when you confront the Community Welfare, they tell you no. They don’t give you an explanation”

**What parents suggested...**

“I’d like to be treated with respect like I was a person not a scrounger”

“It should be made easier for you when you have babies and young children to be seen quickly”

**What those that deliver policies and programmes should think about.....**

Are your Services based on principles and methods of intervention that respect the families’ dignity and rights and respond to their individual needs?

- How do you ensure that your Services Respect the families’ dignity and rights?
- How do you ensure that your Services respond to the families’ individual needs?
- What exactly have you done to implement and promote the above principles and methods of intervention? Do you have documentation on Principles, Good Practice Guides etc? Do you train, supervise and raise awareness of your staff in these issues?

**How do you know that your Services respect the families’ dignity and rights and respond to their individual needs?**

- Have you assessed how in practice these principles and methods of intervention are applied?
- Do you really listen to the families and try to fit the service to their needs and wishes?

**What do you plan to do to improve the situation?**

1. ..................
2. ..................
3. ..................
Guidelines 3: For both those who plan and those who deliver policies and programmes

9. Think about management principles and practices

- Is the policy or programme based on evidence concerning the extent, degree of urgency and nature of family needs?
- Is the policy or programme actually reaching the families it is intended to reach?
- Has the policy or programme clear objectives and procedures for implementation?
- Is the policy/programme outcome based? Is account taken of the earliest indications of change among some of the most marginalised parents — that is, of movement towards social inclusion even though it is difficult to measure?
- Are there enough high calibre staff responsible for planning and delivering a policy or a programme? Are they adequately trained, specifically in dealing with socially excluded families, and supervised on an on-going basis? Have they clearly understood what the policy or programme is about?
- Is a culture of learning, self evaluation and openness apparent amongst those who plan or deliver policies and programmes?
- Does it extend to genuine joint working between governmental and non-governmental bodies, between departments and agencies, and does it involve true partnership with parents?
- Are adequate resources secured so that both policies and programme are implemented and sustained as envisaged?
- Are these resources utilised in such a way that the best results are achieved with the least possible cost?
- Are the structures for delivering a policy sufficiently flexible to deal with change and able adequately to implement any new policy? Are those responsible for developing policies aware of the degree of flexibility in the system?
- Does the policy/programme incorporate an evaluation procedure from its earliest stages? Does it encompass minority groups who tend not to take up services?
- Is there provision for client participation in the formulation, implementation and assessment of the policy/programme?
- Do you really listen to families, including the most marginalised, hear what they say and respond to their advice and feedback?
References


Appendix 1 Operational definitions

For better clarification of the terms used, the following operational definitions are provided:

**Affordable Housing:** Part V of the Planning and Development Acts 2000 – 2002 requires that a percentage of housing in most private residential developments must be made available to the local authority for the purpose of Affordable Housing. The Affordable Housing Scheme provides for the sale of newly constructed houses and apartments in areas where prices have created an affordability gap for lower income house purchasers. These properties will be sold to eligible first time purchasers at prices significantly less than their actual market value. In order to qualify for these affordable housing schemes you must be in need of housing and satisfy an income test.

**Barnardos:** Barnardos works for and with children through a range of services ranging from locally based family support support projects to advocacy and national services providing information, training, publications, research, policy and advice on all matters relating to children. Barnardos’ Family Support Services currently include: Breakfast Clubs, Parent and Toddler Groups, Toy Libraries, After-school Groups and Homework Clubs, Lone Parents Support Groups and Parenting Programmes nationally. Two of the study families accessed two Barnardos services in Dublin 15.

**Aisteor Beo:** The Daughters of Charity Family Centre called Aisteor Beo provides therapeutic intervention for families experiencing parenting difficulties; bereavement, grief or loss, family conflict, and counselling in Blanchardstown, Dublin 15. Families can be both self referred or referred by public health nurses, doctors and other professionals.

**Back to Education Allowance:** The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is an educational opportunities scheme for unemployed people, lone parents and people with disabilities who are getting certain payments from the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The allowance is payable to people who wish to pursue approved second or third level courses of education. BTEA is not an unemployment payment. Participants receive a standard rate of payment which is not means tested. If you are signing for unemployment ‘credits’ only, you may qualify to participate in the scheme but you will not receive an allowance.

**Child Benefit:** is a benefit paid every month for each qualified child normally living with you and being supported by you. A qualified child is: a child under age 16 and/or a child aged 16, 17 or 18 who: - is in full-time education, or - is attending a FÁS YOUTHREACH course, or - is physically or mentally disabled and dependent on you. Child Benefit ceases when the child reaches age 19. Child Benefit is normally paid to the child's mother or step-mother. If the child does not live with the mother or step-mother, then Child Benefit may be paid to the child's father or step-father who is living with and supporting the child. If the child is not living with or being maintained by the parents, then Child Benefit may be paid to the person who is caring for the child. You may, if you wish, nominate someone else to receive payment of Child Benefit on your behalf.

**Community Employment Schemes:** a labour market intervention, which provides temporary work experience and training for the long-term unemployed. The primary purpose of CE is as a transitional programme to reintegrate the long-term unemployed into open labour market jobs. Employment is provided on a wide range of projects, which
are sponsored by communities. FAS provide funding for a full-time supervisor and the participants' payments. A year is the norm for CE participants but this can be extended. The programme is designed to provide temporary rather than ongoing opportunities for persons 25 years of age or over, unemployed for a minimum of 12 months and in receipt of any of the following payments: Unemployment Assistance, Unemployment Benefit, Qualified Adults, One Parent Family Payment, Deserted Wives Benefit, Widows/Widowers pension.

**Disability Benefit:** is a payment made to people who have paid pay related social insurance while working and are unable to work due to illness.

**Dimensions of Social Exclusion:** a lack of consumption, resources, production, public services, social networks and the subjective experience of social exclusion. Consumption means to have sufficient income to consume at least up to some minimum level the goods and services which are considered normal for a society. Resources include accumulating savings, but also pension entitlements, owning property or cultural resources such as education. Production refers to the engagement in an economically or socially valued activity, such as paid work, education, retirement if over state pension age, or looking after a family. How far are public services available, accessible and acceptable to people. Engaging in significant social interaction with family or friends is the key element of the social dimension. The subjective experience cannot be ignored; feelings of poverty, of not being treated as equal, of distrust towards institutions and of powerlessness and marginalisation are crucial indicators that give rise to political concern and demand different policy responses.

**Drop-in Crèche:** As defined by the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996, Explanatory Guide. A drop-in crèche refers to services provided in shopping centres, leisure centres or similar establishment which is provided as part of a customer/client service and where children are left for a short period of time while the parent or guardian is availing of a service or attending an event.

**Family Income Supplement** (FIS) is a weekly tax-free payment for families, including lone parents, at work on low pay.

**Hard-to-Reach Families:** Families that though they exhibit the characteristics of social exclusion, at the time of their first contact with the Social Service they did not use or used very little the available services and programmes.

**High/Scope Pre-school Programme:** In the High/Scope Curriculum, developed by David Weikart and colleagues in Ypsilanti (Michigan) for the Perry Pre-school Project (1960s), children are seen as active learners who plan, carry out, and reflect on their activities. In addition, the curriculum is based on the experiences of early childhood practitioners. The High/Scope environment is carefully planned and divided into distinctive work areas including a book area, a home area, a construction area, and an art area. The curriculum process includes a plan-do-review sequence within the daily routine.

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2 Tackling Social Exclusion in Families with Young Children (Home-Start International 2002)
**Housing Waiting List:** To be eligible for a place on the Housing Waiting List an applicant must, in the opinion of Dublin City Council, be in need of housing and be unable to provide such housing from his/her own resources. The order of priority on the Housing List is determined by the scheme of letting priorities, which includes provision of urgent cases to be awarded overall priority for housing.

**Irish Social Welfare System:** Irish system of income support administered by the Department of Social and Family Affairs which provides a safety net through its assistance payments for certain groups of people who meet particular criteria and are deemed to have an income support need due to their low income and relationship between the category to which they belong (e.g. people with a disability; unemployed persons; carers, one-parent families) and a difficulty in adequately providing for themselves and/or their families finically.

**Local Employment Service (LES):** Established by the partnership in 1997 currently reaches up to 1,000 clients many directly into local employment. The function of LES is to provide a gateway, or access point, to the full range of opportunities, which should be available to enable a long-term unemployed person to return to work or training. These services include guidance, training, education and employment placements and supports.

**Maternity Benefit:** is a payment for employed and self-employed women who satisfy certain PRSI contribution conditions on their own insurance record.

**Medical Card:** Under the Health Act, 1970, determination of eligibility for medical cards is the responsibility of the Chief Executive Officer of the appropriate health services executive. Other than for persons aged seventy years and over who are automatically entitled to a medical card, medical cards are issued to persons who, in the opinion of the Chief Executive Officer, are unable to provide general practitioner medical and surgical services for themselves and their dependants without undue hardship.

Medical card holders and are entitled to a full range of services including general practitioner services, prescribed drugs and medicines, all in-patient public hospital services in public wards including consultants services, all out-patient public hospital services including consultants services, dental, ophthalmic and aural services and appliances and a maternity and infant care service.

**Means Test:** there are four specific tests for different categories of income: income from earnings (and income from spouse’s earnings); benefit and privilege (that is the value of living in the family home); savings and investments and rental income from property.

**One Parent Family Payment:** One-Parent Family Payment is a payment for both men and women who, for a variety of reasons, are bringing up a child(ren) without the support of a partner. A person who is unmarried, widowed, a prisoner's spouse, separated, divorced or whose marriage has been annulled and who is no longer living with his/her spouse is eligible to apply for this payment. It includes Deserted Wives Allowance and Lone Parent’s Allowance. There are 79,296 lone parents (Dept of Social and Family Affairs, 2002) receiving the One-Parent Family Payment. The Payment is means tested and is and is only applicable to those families on low incomes.
**Protective factors:** For example, family networks, good relationship with partner, sound personality, personal and communication skills etc

**Risk factors:** For example bad health, family breakdown, immigration, language problems, single parenthood, lack of transport, geographical isolation etc

**Secondary Benefits:** a collective term given to a group of payments, mainly back to school clothing and footwear allowance, housing supplements or subsidies, fuel allowances, back-to-school allowances and Christmas bonuses. The term secondary benefits has no particular legal meaning, but is usually used to describe the non-cash benefits a person on social welfare might be getting in addition to their main payment. It is important to note that some of these schemes (in particular, medical cards and differential rents) are major schemes in their own right and are available subject to conditions such as means tests both to people on social welfare and to people whose income is from other source.

**Universal payments:** a class of payments paid to everyone who passes a specific contingency and are paid regardless of means and social insurance record. In Ireland child benefit is universal.

**Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme** (VTOS): administered by the Department of Education and Science, it is operated through the Vocational Education Committees. The courses provided under the scheme may be for up to two years in duration. They can lead to qualifications such as Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, Post Leaving Certificate and City and Guilds Certificates. The main objectives of the scheme are: a) to give unemployed people education and training opportunities which will develop their employability b) to prepare people to go to paid employment or to further educational opportunities leading to paid employment. There is no fee for a VTOS course, and books and materials are provided free of charge.
## Appendix 2 Learning from Families: Map of Departmental Responsibility/Programmes for Family Support with Emphasis on Families with Young Children in Ireland

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<td><strong>Teenage Parenting Support Projects</strong></td>
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<td>- National Children’s Office, EOCP (see below)</td>
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<td>National Children’s Strategy research - <strong>Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland</strong> (10,000 children from birth, 8,000 from 9 years to adulthood, joint responsibility with Social and Family Affairs)</td>
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<td><strong>Ready Steady Play National Play Policy</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Child Benefit</strong> (€131.60 for first 2 children + €165.30 for 3 or more per month)</td>
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<td><strong>Maternity Leave</strong> (18 weeks)</td>
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<td><strong>Back-to-School Clothing and Footwear Allowance</strong> (€80 per aged child 2-11)</td>
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<td>Grants for voluntary organisations providing marriage, relationship, child and bereavement counselling services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department</td>
<td>Principal Responsibility</td>
<td>Sections / Structures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education and Science</td>
<td>• Funding, managing and inspection of pre-school education</td>
<td>• Primary Section(s) Inspectorate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• measures for children at risk of educational disadvantage</td>
<td>• Social Inclusion Unit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Funding, managing and inspection of infant classes in primary schools.</td>
<td>• Educational Disadvantaged Committee</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Funding, managing and inspection of specific measures to address educational disadvantage in primary schools.</td>
<td>• Educational Disadvantaged Forum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Vocational Education Committees</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justice, Equality and Law Reform</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Chair of National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee</td>
<td>• Equality and Childcare Division</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Establishment and funding of County Childcare Committees</td>
<td>• Childcare Directorate</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Management and Administration of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000 to 2006</td>
<td>• Inter-Departmental and Inter-Agency Synergies Group</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee</td>
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<td>• Certifying Bodies Sub-Group of the NCCC</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Advisory Sub-Group</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Working Group on School Age Childcare</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• County Childcare Committees</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Principal Family Support and Early Childhood Education and Care Programmes**

- **Early Start Programme** incorporating the Rutland Street Project
- **Pre-Schools for Traveller Children**
- Provision in Training / Further Education Centres
- **Primary School Infant Classes, including Special Classes for Children with Learning Disabilities**
- **Special Schools for Children with Learning Disabilities**
- Giving Children an Even Break
- Designated Disadvantaged Areas Scheme
- Support Teacher Project
- Visiting Teachers for Travellers
- Resource Teachers for Travellers
- School Completion Programme

**Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme**

- Learning Support / Resource Teachers
- English language provision for Non-Nationals
- School Development Planning
- National Educational Psychological Scheme
- 8-15 year old Early School Leavers Initiative
- Youth Reach (15-18 year olds who left mainstream education with no qualifications)
- Adult and community education

**Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP)**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs</th>
<th>Principal Responsibility</th>
<th>Sections / Structures</th>
<th>Principal Family Support and Early Childhood Education and Care Programmes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs</td>
<td>To promote and support the sustainable and inclusive development of communities, both urban and rural, including Gaeltacht and island communities, thereby fostering better regional balance and alleviating disadvantage, and to advance the use of the Irish language</td>
<td>Udaras Na Gaeltachta, Area Development Management, Commissioners of Charitable Donations and Bequests for Ireland, Dormant Accounts Board, Western Development Commission, Bord na Leabhar Gaeige, An Coimisiún Logainmneacha, Two cross-border implementation bodies - An Foras Teanga and Waterways Ireland</td>
<td>Community Development Programme, RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development), CLAR (Ceantair Laga Ard-Riachanais-areas suffering depopulation), LEADER II groups (some services target rural families), Rural Social Scheme, The Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (i) Services to the Unemployed: (ii) Community Development : (iii) Community Based Youth Initiatives. Drugs Tasks Forces local and regional Assistance from the Dormant Accounts Fund for those affected by economic and social disadvantage, educational disadvantage; and persons with a disability. A number of schemes encouraging spoken Irish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Agriculture and Food | Monitoring and direction of State bodies engaged in research and advice | Teagasc Advisory Service | Planning Post Fischler Programme (previously known as ‘opportunities for farm families programme’) |

| Enterprise, Trade and Employment | Provision of childcare support to those on labour market programmes | FÁS, County Enterprise Boards | Community Employment Programmes, National Framework Committee for Work Life Balance |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finance/Office of Public works Environment and Local Government</th>
<th>Allocation of €12.7 million</th>
<th>Capital Funding</th>
<th>Programme of building new public and social housing (priority to low-income families), Dedicated childcare facility in local authority developments of 75 plus houses, Traveller accommodation, Programme of renovation of existing public and social housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature of the planning and building of childcare facilities and social housing</td>
<td>Local Authorities</td>
<td>Provision for up to 15 civil service crèches for the children of civil servants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Introduction: Explanation of who we are and why we are seeking an interview: to learn from families how they experience the policies and programmes intended by government to help them – what has helped or hindered them in accessing and accepting services (not just Home-Start or Social Services). We want to understand why it is that some people ask for and accept help and others do not. So we are seeking an interview

- To look at what was helpful or unhelpful for families in times of need
- To look at how easy or how difficult it was to ask for help
- To feedback to governments the views of families in Europe who, by taking part and reflecting on their experience, will have helped to compile the joint report.
- We hope to influence government thinking on policies where necessary by sharing parents’ views, with the aim of improving services and support for families.

SECTION 1 PERIOD OF NON-USE OR RELUCTANT USE OF SERVICES
Can you think back to the time you were first referred to Home-Start / other service and your situation then?

A. EXPLORING SOCIAL NETWORKS AND ENVIRONMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and prompts</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1 Were you living here then?</strong> (allow the discussion to flow to get a picture that could include the following prompts)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>On your own?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Husband/wife/partner?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Children?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother alive? (explore contact)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other relatives? (explore contact)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>In-laws? (explore contact)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Special friend?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Neighbours: friendly?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unfriendly?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hostile?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in and out of each others houses?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keep themselves to themselves?</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### A2 Had your children friends to play with informally?
- Neighbours children?
- Immediate siblings?
- Cousins?
- How often did they get to play?

### A3 How was the area you were living in?

**Social Environment**
- High unemployment
- Influx of immigrants
- Funding cuts
- Discrimination
- Lack of community spirit

**Physical Environment**
- Physical remoteness
- Lack of public spaces
- Lack of appropriate social services/amenities e.g.
  - School
  - Clinic/GP
  - Hospital
  - Post office
  - Baker
  - Grocer
  - Pharmacy
  - Meeting place/village hall/Pub
  - Sports Centre
  - Play grounds
  - Library
  - Poor public transport
- Poor road/rail links
- Poor housing
- Pollution
- Bad town planning
- Vacuum in countryside
- Geographical isolation
- Dog fouling
- Racial harassment
- Prostitution
- Violent Crime
- Burglary
- Drug misuse
- Other
A4 Did you get any help or support from
Husband/wife/partner?
Parents/ in-laws?
Relatives/friends?
Neighbours?
(Explore acceptability/ reliability/ appropriateness – willingness to ask/accept help)

A5 How did your social network and where you lived impact on your children?

A6 How did you feel about your living conditions at that time?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and prompts</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1 Did you have a job? if not go to B6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore availability, type of job, working hours, stability of job, whether obliged to take on work e.g. early morning cleaning, night shift, home work, gender equality, whether paid the National Minimum Wage, whether covered by insurance?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>B2 Was your job what you wanted to do?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explore work expectations</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>B3 How did your work fit with your family life?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did work hours match school/childcare hours?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How much spare time did you have?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>For yourself?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>For relaxed play with your child(ren)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>For bedtime stories?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>For you &amp; partner?</td>
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<tr>
<td>For you and friends?</td>
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<tr>
<td>For your close relatives?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was it stressful for you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you have any help?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### B. Exploring Labour Market Participation

**B4 How was it for your children?**

**B5 How did you feel in general about your work?**
Overall, was it felt worthwhile working?

**B6 If not working, were you looking for a job?**
How difficult was it for you to look for a job? (Lack of know-how, presence of children, not enough jobs, other). Did anybody help you and how? Did you get an unemployment benefit?

**B7 If not working, was there anybody else in the household working?**
Explore nature and stability of work

**B8 How did you feel about not working?**
Did you feel bad for not having a job or that you should have had a job?

---

### C. Exploring Consumption and Living Conditions

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<tr>
<th>Questions and prompts</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>C1 Was your family’s income adequate to meet your family’s needs?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Meet food expenses?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pay the bills?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pay expenses for children (clothing, education etc)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buy toys for the children?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Go out for entertainment?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buy presents for family members/friends/children’s friends?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have some holidays?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emergency repairs or buy some extra furniture or equipment that you thought you needed for the house?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you have to pay rent or a loan instalment on top of your other expenses?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How difficult that was for you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you have other debts?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How were your living conditions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Bad housing?
Overcrowding?
Forced to live with relatives?

**C2 How do you think all this affected your children?**

**C3 Did you get any help from anywhere?**
If yes, what and from whom? (From a family member, friend. List here in each country benefits that could have been availed of e.g. in Ireland: Lone Parent Income Supplement Back To Education Grant Child Benefit).
Was this help reliable and substantial

**C4 How did you feel about that?**

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**D. EXPLORING THE FAMILY’S RESOURCES AND “CUSHIONS”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and prompts</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>D1 Did you manage to put something by for a rainy day or have something that you could draw on as a fall back?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>A house of your own?</td>
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<tr>
<td>A car?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some savings?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some piece of property? – we will not include this in Ireland/UK (Explore if anybody helped to obtain all the above)</td>
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<tr>
<td>An insurance scheme that covers health expenses and allows for unemployment benefit?</td>
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<tr>
<td>A degree? Some professional experience? Some practical skills?</td>
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<tr>
<td>A good relationship with partner/parents/children?</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Church?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal emotional resources?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other?</td>
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</table>
### E. EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH PUBLIC SERVICES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and prompts</th>
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<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E1 Many people find it difficult to ask for help from a Service – was it like that for you?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of information</td>
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<td>Attitudes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Inertia</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Independence etc</td>
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<tr>
<td>E2 Before you used Home-Start/ Social Services, did you try to get help from any other agency or services? Did you know where to get help?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health Visitor</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>GP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>E3 Did you use any services for your children?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kindergarten?</td>
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<td>Play group?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speech and language support?</td>
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<tr>
<td>A child minder?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre- or after-school childcare</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>E4 What were your experiences of other services – were they helpful to you? How did you feel about your relationships with services?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>E4 How did you get information about what was available in the community?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>CAB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Centre</td>
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<td>T/V</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Magazines, local paper, Other</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>E5 What for you is the best source of information?</strong></td>
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### F. EXPLORING FEELINGS AND SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and prompts</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **F1 Can you describe how you felt about all this?**  
*Stressed?*  
*Depressed?*  
*Desperate?*  
*Deprived?*  
*Powerless?*  
*Isolated etc?*  
*Other?*  
*Any effect on physical and mental health?* | | |
| **F2 How about your children?**  
*Do you think that they have been affected?* | | |

### G. EXPLORING GAPS AND MISSING POINTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and prompts</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **G1 Thinking back, can you think of any other factors that made your situation more difficult** -  
*e.g. money worries, child behaviour (if not already discussed).*  
*Illness/ poor health*  
*Bereavement*  
*Relationship problems*  
*Low expectations*  
*Loneliness*  
*Domestic violence*  
*In laws*  
*Criticism*  
*Children – behaviour, feeding problems, lack of sleep*  
*Family breakdown*  
*Young mother*  
*Large family*  
*Lack of mobility*  
*Distrust of authority*  
*Lack of legal status*  
*Immigrant status*  
*Too many responsibilities*  
*Problems with the police*  
*Other* | | |
## H. EXPLORING COPING STRATEGIES

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<tr>
<th>Questions and prompts</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H1 How did you manage through that time?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>H2 What did you do to cope with the situation?</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cutting down on expenses?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Buying second-hand clothes?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Borrowing money?</td>
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<td>Other?</td>
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## SECTION 2 TURNING POINTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and Prompts</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TP1 How did you hear about/get in contact with Social Services/Home-Start?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>When exactly did it happen?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of visiting (in months)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When – if there was any point you can remember – did you feel that things began to change?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What were the turning points that made you give them/it a try?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Who or what led to you accepting help?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Looking at my baby and thinking 'What am I doing?'</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TV Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being bullied by a friend (or professional)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A persistent health visitor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</table>
### SECTION 3 THE PRESENT SITUATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and Prompts</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PS1</strong> How would you describe your present situation compared to the situation you were living in before contacting the Social Services/Homestart?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Substantially improved?  ☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partly improved? ☐</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More or less the same? ☐</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Worse than before? ☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>What difficulties that you were facing then, are less of a problem now in terms of: social networks, employment, income, resources, relationship with services personal problems, psychological state</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PS2</strong> Who or what first helped you to feel better? What made the difference?</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Making a friend</td>
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<td>Better housing</td>
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<td>Winning some money</td>
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<td>Move out of district</td>
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<td>Finding child care (preferences?)</td>
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<td>Finding a new partner</td>
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<td>Separation/divorce</td>
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<td>Getting treatment/counsel for a problem</td>
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<td>Children older</td>
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<td>Having a volunteer</td>
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<td>Having a social worker,</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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### SECTION 4 ASSESSING INTERVENTIONS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and Prompts</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AI1</strong> How would you describe the help you have received from the Government/Social Services/Home-Start? Was there any value in it?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>AI2</strong> From the above Services that you (or your children) have used in the past or using now, which have helped you (and your children) most?</td>
<td>Exploration of why s/he thinks so? Effectiveness of intervention? User-friendly Service? What else?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>AI3</strong> Which have helped you (and your children) least? Can you suggest anything to improve them?</td>
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### SECTION 5 HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and Prompts</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HA1</strong> What are your hopes for the future for you and your children? Have you any plans of how to make them happen?</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

### SECTION 6 OBSERVATIONS OF CHILDREN

Any extra points pertinent to children (if present)

### SECTION 7 ISSUES OF RELEVANCE TO THE TARGET GROUP
Family Reference Groups

LEARNING FROM FAMILIES IN EUROPE – Note to Family Reference Group Members

1. We want to enlist families’ help to be part of a Family Reference Group, to ‘test’ out the themes and issues that had been suggested by ten families in the national report about how they experience the policies and programmes intended by government to help them. There will be 6+ in the group. The themes that emerged from the national report were:
   - Work-life reconciliation/attitudes to employment, training and staying at home…
   - Benefits and getting by…
   - Services and delivery of services….
   - Family support ….

The purpose is to feedback to governments the views of families from the countries in Europe (Greece, Hungary, England and Wales and Ireland) who, by taking part and reflecting on their experience, will have helped to compile our joint report to government. We hope to influence government thinking on policies by sharing parents’ views, with the aim of improving services and support for families.

2. We are asking families to participate who have sought help (for example from social services, Home-Start or other services) and who are willing to share their experiences.

3. All discussions will be treated in the strictest confidence and individuals will not be identified.

4. Unless there is any objection, we would like to tape the meeting so that there is no need for copious note-taking. The tapes will be erased at the end of the project.

5. Feedback will be available to all participants – either directly, or through a copy of the report.
Family Reference Groups – Topic Guide

1. Work and family life........
   A. What has your experience been?

   Prompts
   Do you have a job? What type of job is it? How does work fit with family life? How is it for your children? Did work hours match school/childcare hours?
   If not working, do you feel you should have a job? What are the barriers?
   How did you feel about that?

   B. What would you like to see happen

2. Benefits/income and getting by........
   A. What has your experience been?

   Prompts
   Can you meet food expenses? Pay the bills? Pay expenses for children (clothing, education etc)? Go out for entertainment? Buy presents? Have holidays? Emergency repairs or buy some extra furniture or equipment that you thought you needed for the house?
   Do you have to pay rent or a loan instalment on top of your other expenses? Do you have other debts?
   Do you get any help from anywhere, Lone Parent Income Supplement, Back to Education Grant?
   How did you feel about that?

   B. What would you like to see happen?

3. Services and delivery of services........
   A. What has your experience been?

   Prompts
   Was it difficult to ask for help from a Service?
   Outside of Home-Start, did you try to get help from any other agency or services?
   What were your experiences of other services—are they helpful to you?
   How do you feel about your relationships with services?
   Did you know where to get help? How do you get information about what was available in the community? What for you is the best source of information?

   B. What would you like to see happen?

4. Family support
   A. What has your experience been and what would you like to see happen?

   Prompts
   Do you get family support from your own families?
   How would you describe the help you have received from the Government/Social Services/Home-Start? Is there any value in it?

   B. What would you like to see happen?
**Appendix 4 Family Information - Table 1 Risk Factors**

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<tr>
<th>At time of referral to Home-Start</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>5</th>
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<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
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<td>Families</td>
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<td>Consumption &amp; living conditions</td>
<td>Resources &amp; Cushions</td>
<td>Employment</td>
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<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Housing</td>
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<td>€600 in Credit union but owes also</td>
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<td>Experienced post natal depression and stress</td>
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</table>
## Appendix 4 Family Information - Table 3 Case Study Families Current Position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Social network</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Consumption &amp; living conditions</th>
<th>Resources &amp; Cushions</th>
<th>Public services</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Education</th>
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<td>Love of learning</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
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<td>Maintenance Income</td>
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<td>degree</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
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<td>Parents home</td>
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<td>Home-Start</td>
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<td>Inadequacy</td>
<td>but owes also</td>
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## Appendix 4 Table 4

### Family Reference Group 1:

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<th>Participating parent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No and age of children</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3 5 years, 3.5 years 8 months</td>
<td>Lone parent</td>
<td>N/A,</td>
<td>Junior Cert</td>
<td>Irish</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>2 8 years and 6 months</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Mauritian with Irish citizenship</td>
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<td>Degree</td>
<td>Kyrgyzstanean</td>
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<td>4</td>
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### Family Reference Group 2:

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<th>No and age of children</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Employment</th>
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<td>Lone parent</td>
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<td>1 7 years</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1 4 months</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>None, at home</td>
<td>Leaving Cert</td>
<td>Irish</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>Leaving Cert</td>
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<td>33</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>None, at home</td>
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<td>Irish</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>9</td>
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