



Submission
Statement of Strategy 2021 - 2023
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Background

The Teen Parents Support Programme (TPSP) consists of eleven separate family support projects which are located throughout the country in a range of statutory, community and voluntary organisations. These projects are funded by Tusla and the HSE and support young people who become parents while still in their teens. The TPSP places particular emphasis on supporting young parents to complete their education, if that is their choice. The link between educational attainment, health and well-being and enhanced life chances are well documented. Research shows a clear link between the educational level of a mother and the well-being and future educational attainment of her family. For example, *Understanding Childhood Deprivation in Ireland* published by the Department of Social Protection and the ESRI (2012) found that child deprivation is linked not to the age at which the mother gives birth but to her level of education.

This submission calls on the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to address – at interdepartmental level if necessary – two of the barriers which young parents experience in trying to progress to Higher and Further Education: aspects of the SUSI grant and aspects of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS).

SUSI grant and young parents under 23 years of age

Currently young people under 23 years of age are assessed for the SUSI grant on their parents' income. This applies even when these young people are parents themselves and recognised as separate heads of families by other government departments such as the Departments of Social Protection, Health and Housing. Many young parents under 23 years of age have been financially independent of their families of origin – including living separately from them – for several years. It is unacceptable that to be eligible to apply for their own SUSI grant, young parents must demonstrate that they are 'estranged' from their family of origin. This rule undermines them as an independent family unit. It excludes young parents whose own parents' income make them ineligible and it reduces the grant for those whose parents' income is marginal. It requires those who do not get a SUSI grant to pay full registration fees, a cost that is prohibitive for someone on One-parent Family Payment (OFP).

- ***The TPSP is asking the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to bring the regulations governing the SUSI grant in line with other government policy in relation to young parents.***

SUSI grant and part-time courses/Post Leaving Cert (PLC) courses.

For young parents who have given birth while in secondary school, PLCs are very often a progression route to Further and Higher Education. Despite this, students in PLCs are not eligible for the maintenance component of the SUSI grant.

Similarly, those on part-time courses are not eligible for any part of the grant and must pay full registration fees. This makes their education over a longer period considerably more expensive compared to those who can study full-time. Balancing their responsibilities as parents, managing very limited finances, and attending full-time higher education is extremely difficult and, in the experience of the TPSP, many young parents who attempt it drop out. They need more family-friendly, flexible, modular based degree courses where they can gather credits over time. The current choice of part-time courses needs to be widened, particularly at university level, and the student grant scheme should be available for part-time education.

- *The TPSP is asking the Department to work to expand the number and variety of part-time and flexible courses in Further and Higher Education. It is also asking the Department to allow access to the SUSI grant for those on PLCs and for those whose family responsibilities do not allow them to study full-time.*

SUSI grant and those on Back to Education Allowance (BTEA).

Those in receipt of BTEA are ineligible for the maintenance component of the SUSI grant. Lone parents on Rent Supplement who wish to return to full-time study must transfer from OFP to BTEA. They are then denied access to a SUSI grant, making it practically impossible for them to progress. For all students, the maintenance component of the grant scheme covers only part of their living costs. This is even more so for lone parents with the costs of rearing their children, contributing to childcare, and meeting all the additional incidental costs of being a student. With BTEA as their sole income, these additional costs are beyond their reach. This ruling commenced in 2010 as part of budgetary measures during the last recession and there are currently 17,647 people affected by it (DEASP, October 2020). It does not apply to those who are in receipt of Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) or those who are housed by local authorities, both of which are also forms of social housing. The exclusion of those on Rent Supplement is inequitable. It is based on the nature of their housing tenure and an example of how supports from different government departments can interact with each other in a way that is detrimental to a recipient.

- *The TPSP is asking the Department to engage with the Department of Social Protection to rectify this inequity so that this barrier to Higher and Further Education is removed.*

Sponsored component of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

For any young person, the Leaving Certificate is the usual and least complicated route to Further and Higher Education. For a young parent, however, completing secondary school requires access to affordable childcare. Under the Childcare Support Act 2018, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) 'sponsors' young mothers in second level education so that they are eligible for free childcare. However, this sponsorship applies only to mothers who are aged 17 years and under. In practice most students are at least 18 years of age when they are doing the Leaving Certificate. As the NCS stands, a 17-year-old student in

5th Year can get her childcare free but an 18- year-old student in 6th Year cannot. The latter may have to contribute up to €40 pw from her OFP depending on the number of hours she requires and the age of her child.

As it is now one year since its commencement, the NCS is due for Ministerial Review.

- ***The TPSP is asking the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to raise this issue with the Department for Children, Disability, Equality, Integration & Youth with a view to correcting this anomaly and thereby improving access by young parents to Further and Higher Education.***

Margaret Morris, National Coordinator, TPSP
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