

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE PANEL

KATHLEEN CUNNINGHAM

On funding back to education programs for single parents

I recommend that applications for Government finance (i.e Student Assistance Fund allocation for single parents), should be processed through government channels and not through, as it is in some cases, religiously affiliated organisations such as St Vincent de Paul. In my opinion, government funds should be allocated through government channels.

On respect and dignity when accessing Department of Social Protection payments

An area where I positive progress could be made for working and studying single parents, is the fact that in – Blanchardstown, as an example, one parent family payment can only be collected in cash at the post office each week. The time and energy saving solution here is to let those who want to receive payments through the bank, do so. Seeing women and children queue up for cash payments outside the doors of the post office in the cold winter months is to me a really avoidable situation in 2020. On one side we are telling parents to look employers in the eye at job interviews and on the other hand they are queuing outside the post office every week for cash and hoping nobody sees them. Family finance is a private affair and I believe that you should not be able to see that somebody needs government assistance, like seeing them in the 'dole queue'. This impacts on how people see themselves too.

On training and education for single parents

One Family are an organisation that support One Parent families. They run the New Futures program. It is a FETAC Level four course in Personal Development and Career Planning. It is currently only provided in Dublin, and they're trying to get the course online so it can reach more people across the country. I recommend that the government get behind One Family on rolling out that program to the single parents outside of Dublin who would like to take part in that course that could be the bridge between unemployment and college, or the bridge to a new career.

On amended hours for working parents

My recommendation in relation to parents getting back to the workplace is that there is more work to be done on supporting parents who have the capacity to return to work part time. That the message from the top down should be one of highlighting the value that parents bring to the workplace, even if we sometimes do require creative accommodations, like part time hours, reduced hours, job sharing etc.

On childcare cost barriers for working parents

My recommendation is that consideration be given to barriers to work when crèches are needing 800 euro deposits to secure a place for a child so that a parent can get into fulltime work. That 800 euro deposit is a definite barrier for a lot of families.

Some positive remarks, on the theme of government, parenting and families.

Seeing the human side and the parental side of some of our prominent politicians through this Covid-related working from home period that we've been through, has been lovely. It was really good to see examples of politicians representing people who are balancing parenting and working. It was great to see parents – examples being Mary Lou McDonald and Simon Harris, both opening up on social media and bringing the balance of parenting responsibilities and career into the public domain. We love to see that politicians are people too, and it just demonstrated for me that being a working parent is not somebody to be seen as disadvantaged in work and career, or that we need to hide the fact that we are parents to limit being seen as potentially less productive or contributing less to the economy. Parents bring transferrable skills back to the workplace with them and that contribution should be acknowledged.