



Every month we invite a response to our online survey. Our survey for February 2015 asked what people thought about possible reforms to the Child Benefit Payment. The aim of the survey was to find out what those parenting alone or sharing parenting think about the Child Benefit payment as it is, and whether or not it should stay universal or be altered on an individual needs basis.

The Questions

1. Do you agree that Child Benefit should be universal?
(A universal payment is available to everybody regardless of income.)
2. Do you think a portion of the payment should remain universal, with a top-up portion tailored to those of increased need?
3. Should the Irish Government consider pooling together all the social supports for children i.e. Child Benefit, Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance; or in other words, a Basic Income for a Child?

The Results

Q. 1 & Q. 2 When asked if Child Benefit should be universal 58% of respondents said no, citing that the payment should be tailored to a person's individual needs:

"No, I believe it should be means tested against income but allowing a tax credit for those who work & put kids in childcare."

"No, it should be based on income"

Some respondents commented that people who don't need their child benefit on an immediate basis were not using it and letting it build up.

"No, I don't agree. Child Benefit should be for people who really need it on low income, not for people who are rich and probably leave it build up in their banks"

"No, it should only be given to families on a low income or on social welfare. A friend of mine years ago had 2 small children and her and her husband had good jobs. She never needed her child benefit so it sat in a bank account year in year out and she bought the kids cars with it when they reached 18 - so no, it should only be there for them that need it."

On the other hand, 35% of respondents said that the payment should remain universal and claimed that means testing would not be useful or fair and would be too costly.

"Yes, I do as the cost of means testing it will be excessive."



“Yes, if there is a child benefit it should be given to everyone. Even a basic amount to everyone with a top up for lower income families.”

“Yes, it should. Otherwise wouldn't be fair.”

“Yes, but the payment amount should be linked to need, the higher you earn the less you get. I think this would free up funds for those who need a higher payment on lower incomes.”

There were also concerns raised about people who may leave their benefit untouched until further down the line.

“For those who have the luxury of putting that money into a bank account either for themselves or the child and 'save' it, then the money should be subjected to the same savings dirt tax as other monies and not shielded because it is in the name of a child.”

It was also noted that even though a family may appear to be affluent, it does not mean that they are necessarily better off or that parents have equal control over how money is spent, particularly in situations of domestic violence.

“Yes - because you do not know how income is distributed in some households. In cases of domestic violence for example, control of money is just one form of abuse. At least the money is paid to the mother who can use it directly on children or to support her safety/escape plan.”

When asked if some of the payment should remain universal with a top-up available for those of increased need 53% of respondents said Yes saying that while everyone should get something, some families rely on it more than others.

“Yes.... For people who are actually stuck and not the people who pretend to be, but who have partners living with them working and not declaring.”

“Yes I think this would be a better option for the payment. People who are on low incomes or have sick children or on benefits should have a higher amount than people in the higher paid jobs.”

It is clear from these responses that while people believe that all parents should get something, there are also a number of people who believe that families on a lower income or are struggling in other ways should be given a top-up fitted to these needs.



Q. 3 Our last question, on whether or not Government should pool together all child supports into one Basic Income for a Child, saw 56% of respondents stating that it was a good idea. These responses were mostly based on people thinking it would be a much more efficient system and would simplify matters for both the social welfare offices and the people in receipt of payments.

“Yes, I do. Current system is administratively complex and costly.”

“Yes, maybe it would streamline the social welfare system and speed up administration.”

33% of respondents said no to this question as they believed pooling the benefits would make things more difficult for people who are already struggling. They also stated that certain payments come out at times when they are needed most.

“For those in receipt of the payments the timing of those payments correlates with direct expenditure, e.g. Back to School Allowance is paid out at the time that people are purchasing new uniforms and school supplies. I know in my case, I welcome that as the money goes directly to that need once it arrives. Similarly the child benefit is allocated on a month-by-month basis to pay for school book rental, new shoes or underwear requirements, school trips, school sports expenses and monthly childcare. When one is living hand to mouth, being able to focus payments directly makes one feel as if one is managing the mounting costs and debts.”

“No, these payments are granted on a means related basis, as they should be. Pooling would only increase the problem of valuable expenditure being spent unwisely, by giving social allowances to families who don't need it.”

Conclusion

It is clear from the survey responses that the majority believe there needs to be some reform made to how Child Benefit is used, with most respondents stating that it should be a fair and appropriate support for families in a diversity of circumstances.

Changes to social welfare payments and other supports across different Government departments are causing stress and worry for thousands of families who already struggle and pushing many even closer to the brink of poverty. One Family continues to call out for joined up thinking across all Government departments, for clear communication of changes, and for careful planning and consideration of impacts of change and reform across the board for one-parent and shared parenting families.