



## **Colleges and Lifelong Learning Policy Commission Call for Evidence**

**OPFS Submission  
Single Parents & Further Education**

**Sept 2016**

Glasgow City Council has established a Colleges and Lifelong Learning Commission to look at barriers to participation in college learning, and identify possible solutions to tackle these barriers. <https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/CLLPC>

### **Call for Evidence**

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The Commission has asked for views, and any available evidence that will help to better understand:

- Barriers to participation in College and Lifelong Learning
- Who is most affected by these
- Solutions to remove these barriers

This submission gives a response to these questions from the point of view of single parents. It is based on OPFS work with parents in local communities in Glasgow & feedback from a focus group of 10 single parents brought together to respond to the Commissions questions.

### **One Parent Families Scotland**

One Parent Families Scotland is Scotland's national single parent organisation. OPFS provides expert information, advice & family support, along with training activities, work preparation programmes & flexible childcare, tailored to the needs of single parents.

OPFS model of transformational change has co-production at the centre by involving single parents as volunteers, peer mentors and as members of the board. Involving Single Parents in ways that recognise their different needs, experiences, concerns, knowledge, interests and abilities is central to our work. OPFS encourages and enables single parents to believe in themselves, enter employment, training or education and take up new opportunities. OPFS also delivers vital childcare services – giving children high quality care and learning experiences as well as allowing parents to work, learn, and take part in training.

OPFS works with some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised parents. Our transformational approach enables single parents to increase their self-esteem, confidence and skills, increasing access to employment, training and education. OPFS programmes raise participants' aspirations and expectations – giving them the desire, confidence and skills to change their lives and support to challenge the structural barriers that prevent them from achieving their potential.



This Paper from OPFS aims to

- Identify the barriers to participation in College & Lifelong Learning facing single parents
- Recommend some possible solutions to tackle these barriers.

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## **Single Parents in Glasgow Profile**

Glasgow has the highest rate (40.4%) of any Scottish local authority, representing 26,454 single parent households in the city. The proportion of all households that are single parent family households is predicted to rise between 2010 and 2035, by 42% in Glasgow. Nine out of ten single parents are female. The average age of a single parent is around 38 years. Single Parents are a varied group in terms of income, employment and routes into lone parenthood, but compared with couple families they are more likely to experience poverty, including in-work poverty, and work in low-status occupations.

Various UK welfare policy changes have had a significant impact on single parents with young children. This is particularly true for the changes to Income Support eligibility. Single parents caring for their children and entitled to Income Support are expected to move onto Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) when the youngest child reaches five years old, unless entitled to another benefit due to disability or illness. Once on JSA, they must seek, and be available for, work – or face much tougher penalties under a new sanctions regime.

Most single parents are more likely to be in low-skilled or routine work. The Scottish single parent employment rate is 58.1%, according to data from the 2011 Census. In Glasgow, a different picture emerges with only 49.5% (13,108) of lone parents in paid work, of which 63.2% (8,285) are in part-time work.

### **Lone parents and poverty**

Lone parent families are more likely to experience child poverty than are couple families, regardless of whether they are in or out of work. For example, 22% of all children in lone parent families live in poverty before housing costs, almost doubling to 43% after housing costs. In contrast, 16% of children in couple families live in poverty, rising to 22% after housing costs.

Lone parent households are six times more likely to contain no earner. However, important in-work poverty differences also exist. Poverty among children with both parents working full time is 5% after housing costs, rising to 10% where one parent works full-time and the other works part-time. Among children with a lone parent working full-time, almost one in five (17%) are in poverty, rising to 31% among those with a lone parent working part-time. Furthermore, lone parents' average earnings are the equivalent of one-third of couples' earnings.

Research also shows that single parents disproportionately enter lower skilled occupations, which are typically low paid, less secure and often involve short-term contracts. Twenty-seven percent of single parents enter elementary jobs which require little or no formal



training, such as cleaning or kitchen and catering work; a further fifth enter sales and customer service posts. Twenty-two percent take roles in personal service occupations, such as care assistants or childminders. In total more than two-thirds (68%) of single parents enter these types of roles – which, inevitably, have much more limited opportunities for development and progression. Retention in work is also lower for lone mothers compared to mothers in couples. It is estimated that as many as 22% of single parents who start a job go on to experience a spell of unemployment or inactivity in the following 12 months .

### **Lone parents and Qualifications**

The vast majority of single parents want to take up paid work when the time is right for their family. However, a lack of qualifications can hold single parents back from fulfilling their potential; limiting their ability to find employment, restricting their earning capability, and reducing opportunities for progression.

Single parents are disproportionately lower qualified than other groups, and of those in employment (60 per cent), over two-thirds enter the lowest paid occupations. This has a significant impact on their ability to earn enough to keep themselves and their children out of poverty. Better paid work is out of reach for many single parents; occupations that attract higher salaries require intermediate or higher level qualifications, and don't routinely offer the flexibility single parents need in order to dovetail work with their caring responsibilities.

Welfare-to-work policies underpinning benefit conditionality discourage unemployed single parents from pursuing further education. Government-funded courses for jobseekers predominately focus on addressing basic skills gaps and job search techniques, with a view to moving claimants into work as quickly as possible. Moreover poverty and the risk of further indebtedness is a barrier to many single parents contemplating a return to further education, despite the longer-term benefits associated with skills acquisition.

More action is needed to improve the qualification levels of single parents and take a longer-term approach to supporting single parents into sustainable employment. The current trajectory of welfare reform stifles their job prospects and limits the potential financial gains to the government.

Single parents face an inflexible labour market. Funded opportunities for single parents to study for further qualifications - to improve their chances of finding better paid, sustainable employment - are scarce. Lack of opportunity to attain further qualifications not only leaves single parents heavily reliant on in-work financial support to top up low wages when they do find a job, it also limits the amount of revenue from income tax and national insurance contributions.

### **The role of further education in back-to-work provision**

For single parents on JSA/ ESA, their route into paid work is facilitated by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and/or the Work Programme therefore the link with access to further education & being a benefit claimant is a crucial one for parents. The regulations that stipulate their benefit conditionality are rooted in a work-first approach. This approach prioritises moving claimants into work as quickly as possible, with very limited access to education and training through either JCP or the Work Programme. What training there is focuses on short-term practical activities such as writing a CV or acquiring basic skills like IT, numeracy or literacy.

Research shows only a small proportion of single parent claimants are getting access to level 3 training - which could lead to much improved wage levels - out of which a tiny



minority of level 3 referrals are via JCP. Most single parents tell us they are either signposted or self-refer to training. However, without permission from their Job Coaches, they could be required to leave a further education course in order to take up employment or face a payment sanction if they refuse.

Jobcentre Plus performance is measured by how quickly claimants move off benefits, regardless of the destination. The performance of the Work Programme is measured differently, there is a greater emphasis on sustainability which is welcome but Work Programme providers still prioritise getting jobseekers into any job, rather than investing in upfront vocational training.

For single parents on jobseeker's allowance - and to a lesser extent those on income support - embarking on a further education course is solely at the discretion of their JCP or Work Programme adviser. Without an adviser's consent, single parents risk falling foul of a sanction for failing to adhere to their Claimant Commitment Document. Jobseekers are expected to continue to actively seek work whilst training, and if offered a job often have to be prepared to drop out of further education or face a payment sanction.

Universal Credit – the new social security scheme that combines six in and out-of-work benefits – operates on a similar basis. Single parents in the work-related activity and full conditionality groups will have to seek permission from their Job Coach to enrol on a further education course. Advisers will have increased levels of discretion and will be expected to provide personalised and tailored support to claimants; however the emphasis remains on the work-first approach and the short term goal of moving single parents off out-of-work benefits and into employment of any sort as quickly as possible.

This approach can undermine the work aspirations of single parents and stifle ambition – effectively preventing them from getting a job that offers better pay, greater security and improved chances of progression.

## **Focus Group with Single Parents**

OPFS arranged for a group of parents to meet to discuss 2 of the key questions asked by the Colleges and Lifelong Learning Commission

### **1. Barriers to participation in College and Lifelong Learning**

- Lack of knowledge and information about where to start, funding available, choosing the correct course.
- Financial impacts, impacts upon benefits.
- Told by College I was too old, should just get a cleaning job.
- Confused by information.
- Difficult to view complex information like course prospectus on a phone especially with limited data allowance for internet.
- Don't know where to start.
- Not understanding difference between HNC, NC, HND etc. How my previous qualifications fit into these levels.
- Feel ancient.
- Fear of meeting new people.
- Don't feel comfortable being in a class of teenagers, especially if they're messing around and just there for their bursary money.



- Group work – pressure of carrying other students, arranging suitable time and place to meet that fits around childcare arrangements.
- Lone Parents with young children find it easier to attend College if their child can access an onsite nursery at the College they attend. These places are taken up very quickly. More determined parents will consider using a private nursery or childminder however the allocation of College childcare funds can be quickly allocated. Parents are often left with no childcare options unless they are granted a nursery place which takes the statutory allocated hours that a child is entitled to receive from the hours that the parents requires thus bringing the costs down.

## **2. Solutions to remove these barriers**

- Age appropriate groups, particularly for lone parents and people that have been out of the education system for a while.
- Support.... More Support!
- Flexible start times – allowing delayed start time to take kids to nursery, without getting into trouble and missing course content.
- Smaller groups – as it would be less intimidating, and enable everyone to participate fully.
- Confidence building class to prepare people for transition into College or lifelong learning.
- Provide templates of essays and reports to give pupil's idea of expectations for course work.
- Essay writing skills classes.
- Peer mentors of other pupils to show you around and provide support with adapting to college/university life and routines.
- Supportive and understanding tutor.
- Research and library skills.
- Study skills.
- Clearer information about courses, costs and funding.
- Course prospectus available in booklets like they used to be.

## **Conclusion**

Single parents with lower level qualifications struggle to get on in the labour market; they overwhelmingly work in the lowest paid occupational groups, are more likely to work short hours or part-time jobs, and their opportunities for progression are curtailed. Single parents need access to further education that will open the door to employment in higher paid occupational groups. Single parents are navigating a welfare system that is not currently set up to facilitate career transitions; high childcare costs and a lack of good quality flexible or part-time work can conspire to exclude single parents from jobs that are better paid.

We also know that single parents are highly motivated to work. Eighty-four per cent of single mothers not in paid work say they would like to get a paid job, become self-employed, or go to college/study. Single parents want to earn their own money and be a role model for their children. The support available to single parents seeking to improve their qualification levels does not match their level of aspiration.



**OPFS recommends the following:**

- Adopt an “invest to save” model in the adult skills budget and provide fully-funded opportunities for single parents to attain their first level 3 qualification, prior to their return to paid work and for those already in work
- Jobcentre Plus and Employability/Work Programme providers should undertake early assessment of single parents of the need for skills training; this should include the need for intermediate vocational training, not just basic skills and employability
- Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers should guarantee that single parents who have started their first level 3 qualification will be allowed to complete their course
- Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers should guarantee to fully fund childcare costs for single parents undertaking their first level 3 qualifications.
- Further Education Institutions should recognise potential women returners (Single Parents ) often lack the information and support they need to make informed decisions and to prepare for, and cope with, a move into further education. There is a real need to get information to single parents regarding practical and financial support.
- Government should recognise that there are practical challenges of limited time, money, JCP conditionality requirements and access to childcare for single parents and there should be a joined up approach across different government depts. to increase Single Parents access to further education.
- On-site nursery places, that open before class start time to allow students to have affordable, practical childcare and able to see their child during breaks and access easily if unwell.

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