



**One Parent  
Families Scotland**



# **Single Parent Families, Benefit Conditionality and Wellbeing Necessary, Just, Effective?**

**April 2017**

**Summary & Key Findings**





# One Parent Families Scotland

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# Introduction

**This is a summary of the OPFS Report “Single Parent Families, Benefit Conditionality and Family Wellbeing” For further details, please see the full report on [www.opfs.org.uk](http://www.opfs.org.uk).**

OPFS has a vision of a Scotland in which all families, including single parent families, have sufficient resources not just to survive but to thrive; where they are treated with dignity and respect and have equal opportunities and life chances, enabling them to flourish. To reach their full potential, single parents need to have the conditions which support their health and wellbeing, including opportunities to access good quality, well paid employment. How their children fare is equally important.

To access good quality employment single parents have to overcome a number of barriers: the challenges of balancing caring responsibilities and work, increased risks of poverty, labour market disadvantages and gender discrimination as well as the lack of flexible, affordable quality childcare.

OPFS has produced this policy paper because, as service providers, our experience of the impact of the conditionality regime on single parents in Scotland gives us very serious cause for concern. OPFS advisors and support staff have dealt with hundreds of single parents whose lives have been turned up-side down by the threat of sanctions, and for some a reduction in their benefit resulting in having to visit a foodbank to survive. Many of these parents have provided their testament for inclusion in this report. We are concerned that rather than moving towards a society where single parent families can flourish, we are seeing the results of a policy which only serves to exacerbate poverty and inequality and close down choices and opportunities for single parents and their children.

There is already a large body of evidence about the negative impacts of sanctions on single parent families and others.<sup>i</sup> But there is less focus on the long term impacts of living with the wider conditionality regime. This paper focuses on the majority of single parents who, although they did not actually receive a sanction, nevertheless live with the threat of sanctions on a daily basis.

Proponents of the conditionality regime see the majority who have not been sanctioned as the success stories of the system. They are seen as the parents who do the right thing, abide by the rules and meet the requirements placed on them. The other success stories are those who cease claiming or move into paid employment. In this paper we ask questions about these “success” stories. What does this compliance and conditionality mean in practice and crucially what effect does it have on single parent families? In particular, how far does conditionality help or hinder single parents not just to survive but to truly thrive and flourish?

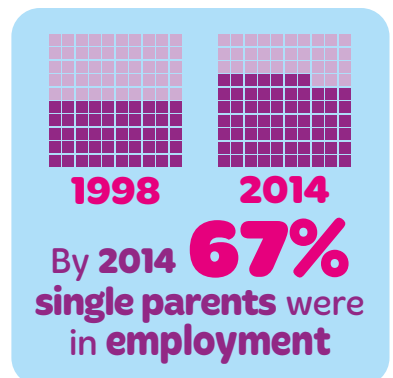
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i [www.cpag.org.uk/content/sanctions](http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/sanctions) lists many reports which describe the impacts of sanctioning.



## Key Points

- To reach their full potential, single parents need to have the conditions which support their health and wellbeing, including opportunities to access good quality, well paid employment.
- The risk of sanctions is far higher than the government claims – at its peak, around 1 in 5 single parents a year were referred for a sanction, and 1 in 7 had a sanction imposed.<sup>ii</sup>
- Single parents are at particular risk of unfair sanctions – they are more likely than other claimants to get their sanction overturned (61%) on appeal.<sup>iii</sup>
- There is already a large body of evidence about the negative impacts of sanctions on single parent families and others but there is also a need to focus on the long term impacts of living with the wider conditionality regime whether or not someone is actually sanctioned.
- Single parents face multiple disadvantages compared to two parent families - increased risks of poverty, greater health inequality, labour market disadvantages, gender discrimination and greater challenges balancing caring responsibilities and work.
- In 1998, less than half of single parents were in work. By 2014 the rate across the UK had risen to 67 per cent.<sup>iv</sup>
- Research has shown that single parent families have been hit hardest by the tax and benefit changes introduced since 2010.<sup>v</sup>
- Already inadequate social security benefits exacerbate the fear of being sanctioned because many single parent families have no financial resources or safety net to fall back on.
- OPFS is seeing increasing numbers of single parents who are suffering from anxiety and depression associated with the fear of being sanctioned.



ii [www.gingerbread.org.uk/content/2394/-Sanctions-and-single-parents](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/content/2394/-Sanctions-and-single-parents).

iii *ibid.*

iv MacInnes, T et al (2015) Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion JRF.

v Hirsch, D (2015) Will the 2015 Summer Budget improve living standards in 2020? JRF.

Available at: [www.jrf.org.uk/publication/will-2015-summer-budget-improve-living-standards-2020](http://www.jrf.org.uk/publication/will-2015-summer-budget-improve-living-standards-2020).



- The fear of sanctioning is reinforced by widespread experiences of stigma. Many single parents find some Jobcentre Plus staff attitudes to be hostile and judgmental.
- Single parents say Jobcentre Plus staff are failing to take into account their need to balance their parental responsibilities with requirements to look for paid work.
- The current social security rules actively prevent single parents from improving their job prospects though further education, training or volunteering.
- The conditionality regime and fear of sanctioning forces many single parents into poor quality, low paid and temporary work cutting across the Scottish Government policy to promote and encourage Fair Work.
- Conditionality undermines parent's efforts to find good quality employment and further entrenches the labour market disadvantages that single parents and especially single mothers, face.
- Analysis has highlighted that in 2020 a single parent family with one child (working full time on the National Living Wage) would be £80 short of what they need every week, compared to £39 short in 2015.<sup>vi</sup>
- Conditionality is forcing parents to make decisions which they feel are not in the best interests of themselves or their children - undermining their rights and responsibilities as parents.
- Conditionality and the associated stigma represents a fundamental failure to take the best interests of the child into account contrary to both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Scottish children's rights legislation as well as wider Scottish Government policy such as Getting It Right for Every Child.<sup>vii</sup>
- Since 2001 the number of single parents claiming income support or jobseekers allowance has fallen by around 20% but only half of these have moved into paid employment.<sup>viii</sup>
- OPFS is seeing increasing numbers of parents who have moved from jobseekers allowance on to employment and support allowance as a result of the stress caused by living with the threat of sanctioning.
- Based on both our experiences of working with single parents and other available evidence we conclude that the ongoing experience of living day to day with conditionality is having a profoundly negative effect on single parent families' health and wellbeing and is undermining efforts to tackle health inequality.

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vi Maclnnes, T et al (2015) Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion JRF. Available at: [www.jrf.org.uk/mpse-2015](http://www.jrf.org.uk/mpse-2015).

vii Just Fair (2014) Going Hungry? Available at: [www.barrowcadbury.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Going-Hungry-Human-Right-to-Food-REPORT-FINAL-1.pdf](http://www.barrowcadbury.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Going-Hungry-Human-Right-to-Food-REPORT-FINAL-1.pdf).

viii Webster D (2014) Fawcett Society, Who Benefits? Inquiry into women and JSA. Available at: <http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/CPAG-Fawcett-Soc-DWebster-evidence-rev-8-Jul-14.pdf>.



## Summary Action Plan and Recommendations

Our experience of working with single parents alongside the evidence from academics and others has led us to conclude that in the long term the conditionality regime should be abolished and replaced by a system which treats parents and their children with dignity and respect. In the meantime we must also do all we can to support families affected by conditionality. To support single parent families we need to:

Take action to **challenge the UK Government's continued use of conditionality.**

Focus efforts on **reducing the impact of conditionality** in the short to medium term.

**Develop and promote positive alternatives** to conditionality; approaches which support single parents and children's wellbeing.



## Challenging the conditionality regime

### Actions for the Scottish Government and stakeholders

To support action to challenge the conditionality regime the Scottish Government should fully incorporate the United Nations Children's Rights Convention (UNCRC) into Scottish Law. The Scottish Government should develop a good practice, human and children's rights based approach to the UK conditionality regime. This should include:

- Urgent discussions with the UK Government and DWP focused on the importance of ensuring that human rights and children's rights are taken into account
- Guidance and support and training for all staff engaged in making policy and delivering services which affect single parent families, about need to take the relevant guidance, legislation and treaties into consideration and, for Jobcentre Plus, considering referrals for sanctions
- Implementation locally by Community Planning Partnerships and others working alongside Jobcentre Plus.
- The Scottish Government and partners should provide training and support to newly devolved service providers on how to ensure they meet legislation and guidance to protect parent's and children's rights and wellbeing.
- Training to tackle stigma and discrimination, co-produced by single parents and stakeholders should be made available to Jobcentre staff nationally.

The Scottish Government and partners should support and fund a national anti-stigma campaign to support single parents and others who are living with conditionality.

Progress on all these measures, should be assessed using the Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA).

The current list of public bodies to whom the CRWIA should be extended to include the new Scottish Social Security Agency and Employability Service.



## Reducing the impact of conditionality

### Actions for Westminster and UK stakeholders

- Key short to medium term reforms requiring urgent action at a UK level are:
- Reinstate specialist single parent job coaches across Jobcentre Plus
- Issue every single parent claiming social security benefits with a clear fact sheet on their rights
- Ensure the rigorous application of the guidance and legislation covering the current lone parent flexibilities
- Introduce safeguards so that the claimant commitment is
  - genuinely a co-produced plan which allows parents to agree realistic and achievable goals and
  - all work preparation and job seeking requirements reflect single parents caring responsibilities
- Amend the regulations to allow parents to participate in further education, training, volunteering or employability programmes without fear of sanctioning
- Introduce a duty on work coaches to show they have considered the impact on child well-being of any decision they require a parent to fulfil
- Introduce a duty on DWP Decision Makers to show they have considered the impact on child well-being of any sanction they decide to impose
- Introduce an early warning system so that parents know they may be sanctioned and why
- Implement automatic entitlement to hardship payments for single parents who have been sanctioned
- Pilot alternatives to financial sanctions and the current conditionality regime.

### Actions for the Scottish Government and stakeholders

The Scottish Government should use newly devolved powers over welfare to support single parent's incomes both in and out of work by, for example, uprating child benefit.

The Scottish Government should continue to invest in specialist welfare and money advice and support for single parents to enable them to effectively challenge sanctions and claim their full benefit entitlements.





# Develop and promote positive alternatives to conditionality

## Actions for the Scottish Government and stakeholders

### Childcare

The Scottish Government should:

- Introduce phased implementation of the increase in hours for eligible two, three and four year olds, prioritising single parents.
- Within the proposed trials for the expansion of childcare, ensure there is specific focus on supporting groups such as single parents and children with disabilities.
- Ensure there is a coherent funding strategy bringing together the various funding streams so that parents can understand and easily access childcare to enable them to study, train or work.
- Ensure there is a mix of provision to enable single parents to choose the childcare that best meets the needs of their children and allows them to work, study or train.
- Expand current investment in childcare to include high quality, wraparound, flexible childcare including before and after school care and greater provision for disabled children.

### Education, skills and training

The Scottish Government should invest in a wide range of part-time, modular education and training opportunities (with access to childcare) for single parents.

Skills Development Scotland should develop and promote a specific programme of family friendly Modern Apprenticeships targeted at single parents.

The Scottish Government should press the UK Government for changes in the social security rules which would enable single parents to volunteer, study and train while they are claiming benefits.



## **The Scottish Employability Service – Fair Start Scotland**

The Scottish Government should press the UK Government to come to an agreement to ensure that all those who are actively participating in Fair Start Scotland Employability Support Services are treated as meeting the requirements to seek work for the purposes of their benefit claim.

A specialist single parent focused employability service should be provided, aimed at tackling the multiple barriers which single parents face in accessing good quality, sustainable work

To promote equality, counteract stigma and provide services which meet parents' needs the Scottish employability service staff should have training in the issues faced by single parents.

## **Employment**

As part of their policy to promote fair work, the Scottish Government and partners should develop a specific program of action to support single parents to access fair work in Scotland, by for example:

- Central, local government and other public bodies making use procurement to incentivise employers to deliver flexible working for parents.
- Designing and advertising all public sector jobs to be part time and flexible by default.



## Conclusion

Our experience supporting single parents leads us to conclude that while the experience of sanctioning continues to have a traumatic impact on families, there is also an unrecognised long term disaster waiting to happen for families and children who are living subject to a relentless and conditionality regime on a day to day basis, *whether or not they actually get sanctioned*. The evidence shows that although conditionality regimes have led to some people moving off out of work benefits in to paid employment, this tends to be poor quality, low paid and insecure work. This is especially so for single parents - reinforcing the labour market disadvantages they face already.

For many parents the stress and anxiety caused by the conditionality regime and the fear of being sanctioned is resulting in worsening health, especially mental health. This is exacerbating existing health inequalities and forcing some parents into claiming ill health benefits instead. There are also growing numbers who are failing to claim their full benefits entitlement altogether, despite not having any employment income.

These issues hamper measures to tackle health inequality and undermine international and national human and children's rights.

In order to thrive, parents and especially children need an environment which is supportive and nurturing of their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. But rather than support and encourage single parents' resilience and confidence and provide them with practical support to meet the barriers they face, our experience is that for the majority of single parents and their children, living with conditionality is profoundly negative and dispiriting experience.

The need for action to support families now to prevent long term damage to the next generation is urgent. Scottish and UK Governments as well as other stakeholders and wider civil society all have a critical role to play. We all have a responsibility to challenge the current conditionality system and work towards a more humane, compassionate and effective approach: one which treats parents and their children with dignity and respect and gives them real opportunities to thrive and flourish.



**One Parent  
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