



## **Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee inquiry on the attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty**

The Scottish Parliament Education & Skills Committee<sup>1</sup> is holding an inquiry on the impact of experiencing poverty on young people at school, including their attainment and their achievement. They are looking at what is happening across Scotland, inside and outside school to support school children experiencing poverty. What work helps them and what the barriers are to this work succeeding.

OPFS warmly welcomes the Committee's inquiry. We are committed to working with government, partners and parents to address the root causes of poverty and disadvantage affecting so many single parents and their children.

### **OPFS Submission**

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) is Scotland's national single parent organisation. OPFS provides expert information, advice & family support, along with training activities, employability programmes & flexible childcare, tailored to the needs of single parent families. [www.opfs.org.uk](http://www.opfs.org.uk)

Our submission is based on the view that while schools play a central role in closing the attainment gap, what they provide is only one feature of the multi-dimensional input across various agencies as well as the key role of parents. We believe that developing trusting and respectful partnerships to achieve better understanding of how poverty affects families is important in helping to close the attainment gap. Our submission highlights:

- Single parents do a brilliant job but paying the bills and juggling work and family life on your own can be a real challenge. Children in single parent families are twice as likely as children in couple families to live in poverty.
- Single Parents have told us they often feel stigmatised by judgmental attitudes and their parenting is called into question. We believe single parents and their children should be treated equally and fairly.
- Schools and the education system are still designed around the two-parent family model - this causes extra pressures for single parents and can also stigmatise children.
- OPFS believes we need to take a family-based approach and not solely child focused interventions; we cannot tackle underachievement by focusing solely on children.
- To tackle underachievement, we need to look at family, community and society level - family income and resources; childcare, training, education and social security infrastructure as well as individual child attainment focused work.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/107857.aspx>

## Single Parent Families - Issues

We agree with Scottish Government that we need a holistic approach to tackling the poverty related attainment gap. Research shows the socio-economic gap in a child's development starts before starting primary school.<sup>2</sup> Action to tackle the various influences on the attainment gap is needed within and outside schools and taking account of the age and stage, a child is at. For example, international studies<sup>3</sup> show that at seven years of age, parental and home influences are about five times more important for children's development than school influences. By age eleven, these are broadly similar and by sixteen years, school effects are about four times more important. In this respect it is important to point out that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has highlighted the strong evidence that growing up in poverty weakens children's educational achievement.<sup>4</sup> Policies to eradicate child poverty are key, particularly for single parent families and particularly when children are young, and a preventative approach is taken.

A quarter of Scottish families are single parent households. The Poverty and Inequality Commission, whose main role is to provide independent advice to Scottish Ministers on reducing poverty and inequality, has highlighted that 37% of all children in Scotland living in poverty live in a single parent family<sup>5</sup> and 94% of these single parents are women.

The most recent government statistics show astonishingly that **49% of children in single parent families now live below the poverty line.**<sup>6</sup> A recent EHRC<sup>7</sup> report highlights that by 2021 single parents and their children will lose a fifth of their income due to welfare reform - an average of £5,250 a year. The **predicted increase in the child poverty rate (after housing costs) for children in single parent households to over 62%** can only be described as catastrophic.

Many single parents face significant challenges resulting from low income, poor health, low qualifications and a range of structural barriers such as the lack of flexible, affordable childcare, low pay, irregular hours and insecure employment; expensive and poor-quality housing and barriers to improving their skills or taking up training or further education.

Welfare reform has had big impact on single parents – for example families hit by the benefit cap are finding themselves in desperate situations. Research by OPFS and the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)<sup>8</sup> describes cases where families face debt, eviction, homelessness or having to move away from their local community, family and the nurseries and schools their children attend. The impact on family well-being and children's education can only be detrimental.

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<sup>2</sup> Evidence from the Growing Up in Scotland, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0048/00486755.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Sacker et al (2002) 'Social Inequality in Educational Achievement and Psychological Adjustment throughout Childhood: Magnitude and Mechanisms.' *Social Science and Medicine*, 55: 863-880.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/data/education-scotland>

<sup>5</sup> <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-advice-Final-Version-23-February-2018.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201617>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/cumulative-impact-assessment-report.pdf> p153

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CPAG\\_OPFS\\_Benefit\\_Cap\\_Report\\_Feb18.pdf](http://www.opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CPAG_OPFS_Benefit_Cap_Report_Feb18.pdf)

In addition, single parents often feel stigmatised by judgmental attitudes which affects confidence levels and results in low self-esteem. A recent Single Parents and Stigma survey by OPFS revealed that three in four (74%) single parents have experienced negative attitudes or stigma in the last two years.<sup>9</sup> Experiencing poverty makes an individual 'different' from the normal expectations of participating in society.

**"I feel like a 'shadow citizen'. I know there are lots of single parents out there but it's as if we are invisible."**

The Scottish Government has said tackling child poverty is a key priority and has set out plans in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act. OPFS is extremely pleased that the Act contains a duty to eradicate child poverty and that there are clear and identifiable targets about when and how this should be achieved and that single parents are identified as a key group. In terms of the priorities as set out in the Scottish Government's 'Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan', for 2018 to 2022<sup>10</sup>, we believe it is important to have delivery plans in place which support single parents to increasing their family incomes through access to training and education. Reducing the costs that families face is also vital - including the cost of school, childcare, housing and the poverty premium for energy.

## **Educational Attainment and Impact of Poverty**

### **1. How has your work supported the educational attainment of children and young people? What has worked well and what barriers have there been to success?**

In 2014, the Glasgow Lone Parent Project was set up by OPFS and Glasgow City Council to improve the way mainstream services support parents.<sup>11</sup> The project had single parent participation at the centre. Key successes and outcomes that the project contributed to included low income families automatically receiving a school clothing grant, instead of having to apply, tackling stigma and ensuring parents' voices influenced work, such as the review of Lifelong Learning undertaken by Glasgow Life.

In 2017 OPFS had a partnership project<sup>12</sup> with Ardenglen Housing Association in Castlemilk. The aim was to involve parents and children from two local primary schools to participate in finding some solutions to reducing the cost of the school day. Synthesised learning from three strands of work underpinned the project: using awareness of and responses to reducing the costs of the school day for low income families; ongoing efforts to tackle the socioeconomic barriers facing single parents; and the role that participatory budgeting (PB) could play in helping community members shape services to meet local priorities.

*"I'm not angry at my mum because she's just had a baby and has three kids but its pressure for the kids and pressure for the parents because my mum felt guilty that I couldn't go. Why do we have costly (school) trips then? I mean I know they're more fun maybe, but it puts*

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/survey-results\\_201411\\_single-parents-and-stigma.pdf](http://www.opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/survey-results_201411_single-parents-and-stigma.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0053/00533606.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.opfs.org.uk/glasgow-lone-parent-development-project-evaluation/>

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/OPFS\\_community\\_choices.pdf](http://www.opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/OPFS_community_choices.pdf)

*people under pressure and it makes people embarrassed and disappointed if they can't go."*  
(Young person, aged 11yrs)

Over 170 people attended an event to listen as parents and children pitched ideas to those attending, on how to use £20,000 to reduce the cost of the school day. The parents from the two groups had been supported by OPFS over a period of months to suggest ideas on how to use £10,000 in their school to reduce the cost of the school day and to consult other parents. Parents helped organise the day and took the lead in the activities.

In terms of learning the project built on the knowledge of the parents about their children's school environment to:

1. Support parents to agree on the barriers to be tackled;
2. How this will be achieved and by whom;
3. Resources required;
4. Overview of outcomes;
5. Partners who need to be involved.

### **Nurture and Transition Groups**

Through Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) in Falkirk for example, our remit is to improve relationships between families and the school. The benefits of this has been:

- Parents and children have a non-statutory point of contact. This is particularly beneficial for hard to reach families because there may be historical negative experiences of education, the support is offered on a voluntary basis and conversations identify the needs of the family as a whole unit.
- Space can be offered outside the school environment. This is beneficial if relationships between the school and family have broken down.

Through the PEF OPFS has facilitated Nurture and Transition Groups. These groups allow children the opportunity to address concerns they may have around peer relationships, school or other issues that they may feel anxious about. Children who attend Nurture groups are identified by the education staff as requiring additional support around settling into primary school as they were very shy and struggled to mix with their peers or as having difficulties within peer relationships, group activities, turn taking etc. due to behavioural difficulties.

Children accessing Transition groups are identified by education staff as children who would find the move to high school particularly difficult for a variety of reasons such as, being very shy, having difficulties with peer relationships, finding small transitions within school difficult to cope with etc. The Transition sessions include topics which address: hopes and worries; a typical day; myth busting; who can help me; bullying and cyber bullying; online safety and social media and keeping yourself safe. There is always scope within the group for the young people to request specific topics which they want to know more about, this will usually include alcohol and drug awareness and how to avoid them. Teachers have told us that we manage the groups well and are able to connect with the children.

### **One to one support sessions**

OPFS also offer one to one support sessions to children experiencing difficulties in school. Issues address can include peer relationships, bullying, family issues, risk taking behaviours and on-line behaviour.

One young person supported in Falkirk, found it difficult to cope with bullying and conflict situations. She openly discussed her thoughts around suicide and had begun to access online videos showing tips for committing suicide. We offered a space to talk and openly discuss what was upsetting her and supported her to become more confident by suggesting better ways to communicate with her peers. This enabled her to work towards improving her resilience and coping strategies. To help keep this young girl safe and reduce the risk factors involved OPFS offered information about other support networks available to her, such as her pastoral teachers and the learning support team.

### **School Clothing Costs**

Tackling the often-unrecognised cost of attending school should be an important part of closing the poverty attainment gap. Single Mothers in an OPFS Glasgow Insight workshop described how they faced financial challenges when paying for children's clothing. Solutions were talked about in the form of top-up costs to clothing grants. Some of the mothers put forward problems of gaps in availability and receiving of funding and difficulties that this then gave them when getting children ready for going back to school. In 2017 CPAG in Scotland, OPFS and the Poverty Truth Commission undertook a survey of parents on the school clothing grant. The report provides a useful snapshot of the challenges faced by many parents across Scotland as well as recommendations which include introducing a minimum level of school clothing grant set at a realistic level across the country.<sup>13</sup>

**“Provide a decent amount for school clothing grant, £20 for a year!!**

**My daughter rips a pair of tights at school every day. £6 for pack of 3 tights x 32 weeks in the year is not cheap. Outdoor and indoor gym kit, School uniform is a kilt, not cheap. Went through 4 pairs of shoes / boots already since August.”**

It's clear from our local work that children can't learn when they can't join in, when they are hungry or when they feel judged or stigmatised. Our Braes Children & Family Centre in Falkirk has seen huge successes in supporting families with the cost of school through our emergency store and school clothes project. Children who have said they are not going to school because they cannot wash their hair or because they do not have enough sanitary product or their clothes are dirty have been able to access products which can solve these issues. From August to December 2017, 31 parents accessed school clothing donated by the local primary school. This saved families a total of £1,416 and 26 families have accessed the emergency store. The store has been used 78 times. Families made a saving of between £13 - £30 each visit.

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<sup>13</sup> [www.opfs.org.uk/school-clothing-report/](http://www.opfs.org.uk/school-clothing-report/)

### **Extra-curricular costs of school**

OPFS has also supported families to afford the additional cost of the school day by providing extra-curricular items such as African Flag, World Book day, Superhero and Pudsey attire. Many individuals are unaware of the hidden costs these days incur and this very often results in non-attendance as parents and children are embarrassed that they cannot afford to be involved.

#### **The Hidden Costs – One Family’s experience**

*One example of the hidden cost on top of the costume cost was of one parent attending the Centre that had four children attending the local primary school. She was told on a Thursday before a long weekend school break that the children were to dress up in colours of an African Flag. As she did not have appropriate clothes she would have to take her six children (two high school pupils) on the bus into town. The tee-shirts would cost £8.00, however, the bus fares would have cost £22.50, additional lunch costs, as the children would want to eat in town, would cost £14.00 for a happy meal and a treat while in the shop might cost £14.00. Buying the required items would, therefore, cost £58.50. On top of this the children are asked to pay a pound for the privilege of wearing the tee shirts, an additional £4.00. A total of **£62.50**. Plus, as the school was closed for an extra three days the mother had to provide lunch to replace the free school meal. Possibly £30.00.*

### **Transition Support**

OPFS Falkirk service facilitated a group for 6 boys who were identified by the local primary as struggling with future transitions into Primary 7 or High School. These sessions included Canoe Orienteering, Rock Climbing, River Inflatables and educational sessions both outdoors and in the Centre. Feedback from the school was extremely positive and the boy’s confidence had grown over the summer which meant they were more comfortable with the transition to Primary 7 and S1.

### **Children affected by issues around parental trauma**

OPFS ran a group for girls aged 5 to 9 years who had been impacted by parental mental health or trauma with 8 girls attending the 12-week programme.

### **Reducing the Barriers**

OPFS family services enable us to promote the benefits of education and learning to both parents and their children while reducing barriers to attending school by improving confidence and celebrating achievements.

### *Feedback from Parents*

*[my son] has really enjoyed doing all the activities. His confidence has really improved over the course of the summer holidays and I have noticed a difference in him wanting to give new things a go! He has gained lots and we are so pleased he has been given the opportunity.*

*I hope other children get a chance to do this.*

*He is not so shy and he is more forward.*

*[My child] has thoroughly enjoyed the programme throughout the summer. I have noticed a big difference in his approach to new things and doing things without a family member. His anxiety has decreased and confidence has increased. This has been very beneficial for him, especially starting the high school.*

*“Got her out and gave her some alone time and made new friends”*

*“[My child said it was fun, she liked baking cakes”*

*“[My child] really enjoyed attending group it gave her time away from her brother who is autistic. She was also given the chance to do a wide range of activities”*

*“Girls group was very beneficial helped [my child] to mix with other kids & gave her some time on her own. Great group”*

### **Keeping children connected – Activities during summer**

During the school holidays in Falkirk OPFS provided a Summer Activities Programme. These events included lunch and activities. 25 parents and 47 children attended on a regular basis. OPFS are aware that many children who normally access free school meals suffer during the holiday period as household funds are more stretched than normal. The holiday period can also be very isolating as children can lose contact with their peers. This can have a detrimental effect on the child returning to school. By offering activities during holiday periods children can maintain essential friendships. Staff also offer structure, routine, boundaries and offer a space where children and their parents can discuss concerns before they become a crisis. All of this makes children’s transition back to school much smoother. We know that the above interventions work and have received positive feedback. Because of previous our success we are one of the few third sector organisations to be approached to deliver projects in Falkirk schools through the Pupil Equity Funding.

### **Are there any services that you / your organisation has not been able to provide that you believe would work?**

OPFS would like to see mental health and wellbeing support for children being offered at an earlier stage as the main and often only option is Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services or Educational Psychology (both underfunded). Our experience is also that children attending these services become stigmatised and enter into the statutory system whereas if issues are dealt with early there may not be a need for statutory interventions. Our service offers lower level support around emotional health and wellbeing; however, funding is tight and precarious.

**If you work with schools/local authorities/others to address school attainment and wider achievement, what makes collaboration on this issue easy/difficult?**

In Falkirk for example there is fantastic track record of collaborative working between statutory and third sector organisations. The buying into GIRFEC was positive because all services used the same paperwork and talked the same language.

All partners are now finding it increasing difficult to attend multi agency meetings, TAC's, forums, working groups etc. This is having a detrimental effect on the support being offered to our young people.

**What else could be done to support the attainment /achievement of children and young people from families affected by poverty?**

As well as the family income, issues which impact on a child's attainment include parental attitude to learning often based on their own experiences and a feeling that they cannot positively influence or support their child's journey through education, children being unable to manage in class and a lack of appropriate support, peer relationships and bullying, caring responsibilities due to parental illness and mental health issues.

Children living in poverty do have high aspirations for themselves, although the jobs aspire to are often of the gendered variety familiar to them.

**The Impact of School Exclusion**

OPFS has supported around 15 children in Falkirk where their parents have been affected by their child's school hours being reduced or parents needing to be available during school hours at very short notice. This has the potential of having a very serious impact on a single parent's efforts to look for and take up paid employment or to participate in training or further education.

**The Impact of School Exclusion - Case Studies**

*One parent we support told us that she felt she had to leave a shopping trolley full of groceries as the school had called to say she must pick up her child immediately. On another occasion she was asked to leave the house during winter with wet hair as she was told that she had to come and get her son immediately. This was not an unusual scenario for this particular parent as her son was on a part time timetable and was often sent home at short notice over a period of four years running from Primary 2 to Primary 5.*

*A second parent has told us that because her son must be taken home for lunch, as he is unable to cope with the lunch routine, she has no time for grocery shopping due to the infrequency of public transport to the outlying village. The parent initially didn't discuss this with anyone which led to her running out of all essential items and approaching us in a very distressed state. On this occasion we delivered a range of items from our emergency store and enough food to last until the weekend when her older child could look after the younger ones and allow her to shop, as her son's difficulties mean that public transport and supermarkets are too overwhelming. This has since been shared with the school who are looking at alternative arrangements to support the child to be in school over lunch.*



## Conclusion

Through our work in local communities we see the impacts include the actual effects of living on a reduced family budget. This consists of not being able to afford: travel costs for children going to school, to hospital appointments, holidays, birthday presents, after-school clubs, leisure and social activities as a family. In a recent OPFS survey<sup>14</sup> most respondents said that at some point or another in their life they had suffered from mental health problems and/or poor mental well-being. This was being caused by the stress of poverty, as well as having an important role in trapping parents in poverty. A recent OPFS briefing provides more background information on single parents, gender & health.<sup>15</sup>

Parents responding to the survey described how they face a range of interconnected barriers which have at the core the unique challenge of the sole responsibility for the care of their children as well as the conditionality pressures to work full-time when their child reaches 3 yrs. of age. In response to these very specific challenges single parents face we believe mainstream services, including education services should provide more tailored support to single parents.

Our experience of working with single parents has not highlighted any 'poverty of aspiration'. Parents want the best for their children and even in very difficult circumstances will often go without themselves and put their children first.

At OPFS we take a two-pronged approach – tackling the causes of poverty through supporting parents to reduce costs and increase income; and the effects/impacts of poverty on educational achievement through our work on cost of school day and holidays and the group/individual/family work we do.

Key points are:

- Recognition by the education system that family make -up is now very diverse. Support for children and flexibilities within the system should reflect this. One size does not fit all.
- Start early – taking a preventative approach, supporting parents and children - Early Learning and Childcare expansion is an opportunity.
- Reduce hidden costs of Early Learning and childcare and school.
- Provide support for families – see school as an enabler (parents can work, train, study; children can learn):
  - Provide opportunities for local parents to have a say in what happens in their local school;
  - Provide and effective link between the local community and local democratic processes;
  - Increase accessibility of small scale funding to local parent-led initiatives, including those that have not been funded previously or recently;

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ChildPoverty18.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <https://vhscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/SINGLE-MOTHERS-HEALTH-AND-INEQUALITIES.doc.pdf>

- Encourage active involvement of parents in ways to reduce the impact of low income in very practical ways.
- Develop solutions that work for the family and not add to strains and stresses as illustrated by the part-time timetable case; keeping children in school, engaged and learning.
- Work in partnership with family and third sector to provide support that allows families to flourish, children to be able to attend school without stresses of hidden costs of involvement and ready to learn.
- We believe that tackling the impact of ‘adverse childhood experiences’ needs to take place within an anti-poverty framework that recognises the structural causes of inequality which can exacerbate the impact of adverse experiences on individuals, families and communities. Poverty reduces ability to put into place protective and remedial factors; impacts in terms of capacity and resources to deal with effects of ACEs. It is important not to get side-tracked by behavioural, individualised descriptions of poverty.

OPFS supports the Scotland’s Poverty and Inequality Commission advice that the Scottish Government should “make significant use of new social security powers if it is going to meet challenging targets to reduce child poverty.” Evidence suggests that topping up Child Benefit by £5 per month would lift 30,000 children out of poverty.<sup>16</sup> The most recent IPPR report also strongly recommends reversing the Two Child Limit on Universal Credit to reduce child poverty.<sup>17</sup>

However, benefits are not the only answer. More needs to be done to support single parents into sustainable family friendly employment that pays the living wage while finding new ways to reduce housing costs for those on the lowest income.

There is much that can be done across the areas of devolved responsibility to minimise the impact of poverty on families and lift families out of poverty. Central to all of this must be the voices of families themselves.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/give-me-five-child-benefit-top-campaign>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.ippr.org/blog/an-anti-poverty-scotland-budget-are-income-tax-cuts-on-lower-earnings-progressive>