



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty



Draft

**OPFS:
COVID-19
Post Lock-Down Planning**

May 2020

OPFS : Scenario Planning to Prepare for Post-Coronavirus Pandemic

COVID-19 is a global public health crisis which is rapidly developing into an unparalleled economic catastrophe. Before this crisis single parent families already faced significant challenges: poverty, isolation and loneliness, poor health or disability and judgemental attitudes.¹ The lockdown has left many single parents isolated, lonely and cut off from their networks. Social isolation and distancing has been linked to increased anxiety, depression, stress and other negative feelings which can have a detrimental effect on health and wellbeing. These risk factors are also associated with poverty, which in itself increases the likelihood of social isolation.

Single parents have sole responsibility for caring for and arranging childcare for their children, including managing illnesses and holidays, rather than sharing these with a partner. This results in a lack of flexibility which impacts on their ability to take up employment, to work towards progression by taking on extra responsibilities and shifts or to undertake training. For some, it necessitates part-time working or working more locally, constraining the range of progression opportunities that can be pursued. The majority of single parents are women, so gender inequality is a key issue. Single parents and their children face around twice the risk of poverty as couples.²

We are extremely troubled about the impact of this crisis on every child affected by poverty. We are also concerned about the longer-term impact on Scotland's aspiration to reduce child poverty by 2030. The steps we take should not only support families now but also underpin progress towards ending child poverty. Those steps must also be consistent with a children's rights approach by continuing to protect children's economic and social rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child³.

Single Parent Families, especially those with health conditions and disabilities, will suffer disproportionately from the current economic crisis. The Bank of England forecasts⁴ that Coronavirus will send our economy on its worst tailspin in 300 years. More than 2.5 million people have made claims for out-of-work benefits. Over 6 million workers have been furloughed, with an uncertain future once the scheme expires. Vacancies are down 60% on pre-crisis levels. Business confidence is fragile⁵ Fewer employment opportunities, and the kind of corrosion in working conditions we saw following the 2008 crash, will disproportionately impact single parents, the majority of whom are women. They already have to work harder for job opportunities, are over-represented in precarious work, earn less on average and more likely to lose their job.⁶

¹ <https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/essss-outlines/covid-19-social-isolation-and-loneliness>

² <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2019-20>

³ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

⁴ www.itv.com/news/2020-05-07/bank-warns-economy-could-plunge

⁵ www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/weekly-vacancy-analysis

⁶ www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2019/01/Setting-the-record-straight

Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis

The Scottish Government publication ‘COVID-19 – Framework for Decision Making Scotland’s route map through and out of the crisis’⁷ sets out the phases by which Scottish Government aims to ease lockdown. They are gradual and incremental and will be matched with careful monitoring of the virus. The publication highlights that the harmful effects on the economy of the crisis impacts hardest on families with low incomes and people who were already experiencing the effects of inequality. For example, the impact for women who take the disproportionate share of caring responsibilities (paid and unpaid), means they are likely to experience particular disadvantage. It states:

“We will take the chance, as we emerge from this period, to chart a better way forward in support of all of Scotland. As we move forward, we want not simply to return to where we were, but to build on the innovative responses seen throughout the crisis to build a Fairer Scotland. We will use the lessons learned during the pandemic to help us make progress towards our long-term outcomes of lower, poverty levels, greater equality, inclusive communities and respected and enhanced realisation of human rights.”

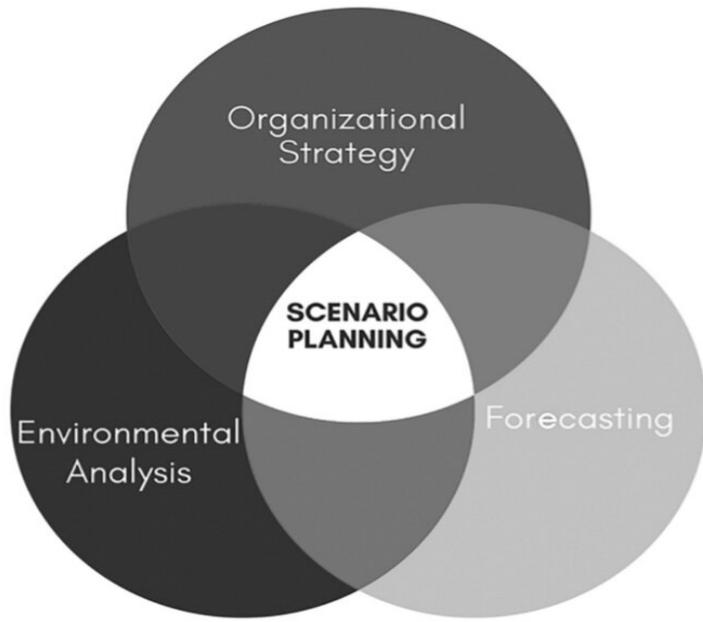
It is certain that the national approach to moving out of lockdown must aim for a “new normal” and an economy and society that is fairer and more sustainable. Achieving these ambitions will require continued progress toward meeting national child poverty targets. Even before the current coronavirus crisis nearly one in four, 230,000, of Scotland’s children were growing up in poverty.⁸ Some families are particularly affected by the crisis as they face multiple disadvantages - those priority families identified in the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan “Every Child Every Chance” - lone parents, families with a disabled adult or child, young mothers, minority ethnic families, families with a child under 1, and larger families.⁹

OPFS as an organisation must be take the crisis as an opportunity to contribute single parents experiences and views to help transform Scotland in a radically positive direction. Scenario planning is a structured way for OPFS to think about the future. We look at how the future might unfold and how those future conditions could impact the organisation and the single parent families we work with. It is the intersection of our organisational strategy, which is the sum of the actions OPFS plans to undertake to meet our long-term goals; forecasting, using data from the past to estimate future trends; and environmental analysis to look at factors external to OPFS that may impact on the effectiveness of our operations.

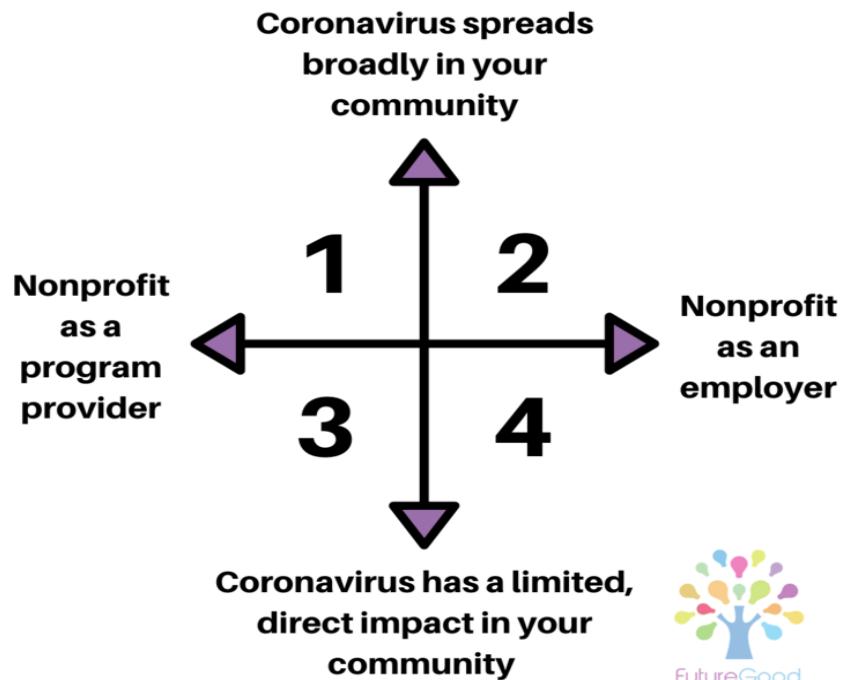
⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/covid-19-framework-decision-making-scotlands-route-map-through-out-crisis/>

⁸ <https://cpag.org.uk/official-stats-show-nearly-one-four-scotlands>

⁹ www.gov.scot/strategy-plan/2018/03/child-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-22 PDF



Below is a Coronavirus Scenario Planning Tool designed by Trista Harris¹⁰ who speaks internationally about using the tools of futurism in the social sector. OPFS is using this model to look at the way forward in a strategic way taking account of how coronavirus might impact OPFS itself and the single parent families we work with.



¹⁰ <http://www.tristaharris.org>

The tool has 4 quarters within which we are looking at opportunities and challenges. The analysis below is based on feedback from single parents, OPFS Managers and staff. This is a living document and will develop as the implications post lockdown become clearer.

OPFS as an Employer

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on all employers across Scotland, including the third sector.

Key Challenges over the next 12 mths include:

- As schools & nurseries are closed, employees don't have access to childcare. As restrictions lift the reduced school hrs and childcare mean staff will have a hard time securing childcare.
- Some staff will need to remote work as social distancing is encouraged and some have underlying health issues.
- Demonstrate how our organisation can work together on a unified mission and vision during the ongoing economic & social crisis.
- OPFS is on a steep learning curve with digital and has had to make decisions rapidly. We should expect this to continue at every level of the organisation. This could change the culture of OPFS as we know it.
- Concerns expressed by childcare staff about nursery sessions being able to be given safely for all children and families involved. Drop offs - how would these happen - some children we need to lift crying from parents and settle with cuddle etc. Some nurseries are talking about having smaller groups, e.g. 1 member if staff with 3 children. How will this be manageable?

Opportunities - some examples for this quadrant might be:

- Remote working is here to stay. The organisation will develop universal rules about remote work that could strengthen colleagues work satisfaction in the future.
- Organisation will develop emergency response protocols that are useful for a variety of emergencies.
- Funders un-restricting previous grants so grantees can be agile and address community needs.
- Digital service delivery will expand. For example, developing virtual events on Facebook with the potential to increase nos using face to face group sessions with 12 parents to reaching hundreds on Facebook live broadcasts and increasing followers on the platform. However, when it becomes safe, face to face services will still be a central and crucial part of the 'new normal'. We will not innovate for its own sake but will build on what we know works with single parents because they tell us.
- There is a strong possibility of large scale unemployment. Family support can, and does, keep families from falling into mental health issues. This is key area where OPFS has skilled staff with the required expertise.

OPFS as Service Delivery Provider

Many single parents find themselves in debt to pay for necessities like food, clothing and housing because their income, often from low wages, doesn't meet their basic living costs. COVID-19 and lock-down has intensified this situation, as single parents face increased living costs and further cuts to their income.

Single parents in paid work, are often in the low paid jobs which are furloughed and so they have lost 20% of their income. At the same time, they have had to cover the costs of having children at home who are not attending school (food, energy costs, home-schooling resources). As well as this, some single parents are receiving reduced or no child maintenance payments from the non-resident parent because they have lost their job, or they are on a reduced 80% wage. Moreover, the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) is

running a reduced service which means it won't be chasing non-payment or taking enforcement action. Taking this context into account, what are the **challenges** facing single parents as we emerge from lockdown?

Key Challenges for Single Parents over next 12 mths

3mths

- Higher unemployment when employers are asked to contribute to furlough pay in August.
- Pressure on some single parents to return to work while early childcare not available and schools still off.
- The ending of measures put in place to alleviate lock-down i.e. Court action for housing arrears suspended - no indication that these measures will be extended.
- Quarterly fuel bills coming in much higher due to lock-down and existing grant opportunities drying up .
- Children with learning difficulties and disabilities being affected by the move from nursery/ primary school to primary/ secondary school as children with conditions like autism often can't cope with change.
- Ensuring parents whose child starts school are able to apply for best start grant/ free school meals / school uniform and supported to move onto U.C.
- Many single parents have been unable to do home schooling at all and the children are not in any form of routine. Some parents (Falkirk) struggled to get their children to school before this so there is likely to be difficulties when schools do start to open again. As this is a known issue, preparatory work will be needed with families.
- Parents worried about what the future will hold for them as they feel they are living on the edge anyway and are aware of the state of the economy. Those single parents who were planning to get back to work when the 1140hrs came in are unsure now because the government have advised that this can be put on hold with individual councils deciding whether they can fulfil any of it or not.

6 mths

- Effect of recession on employment, income and increased costs
- Impact of part-time schooling and reduced day care and out of school care caused by social distancing rules.
- Challenges for single parents with more than one child, if they end up attending school at different times.
- Worries about food esp. if children only at school part-time.
- How are the children from further away areas going to be able to attend school - if they usually get school transport?
- Digital exclusion faced by so many single parent families will impact on children's education and closing the opportunity gap
- The impact on the mental health and wellbeing of parents and children caused by lock down coming to the fore. Without support /interventions some single parents mental health will have deteriorated to a concerning level.
- Real concerns that many single parents we support will have taken backward steps in areas they were progressing in. They will continue to need quite intense support to help them regain what has been lost during this very difficult time.
- Aside from the structural/benefit/policy barriers that single parents face (benefit cap/ 2 child policy/ uc conditionality) concerns about what the job market is going to look like and what kind of support there will be for single parents to enter it. Across Scotland there was minimal dedicated support for single parents seeking employment before this, so it is a worry what will exist after. Single parents are

mentioned in policy documents, but we have not seen much proof on the ground (at Job Centres or from Fair Start).

- The delay in the introduction of Disability Assistance for children and other devolved benefits which were also pushed back.
- Delay in the introduction of Scottish Child Payment .
- Temp £500 free overdraft being ended at a time when in-work poverty will be on the rise and other support measures being paired back or stopped.

9/12mths

- 52 week increase to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits stop and U.C. and Working Tax Credit returns to basic level will cause parents to struggle with budgeting and will lead to increased level of debt.
- Scottish Child Payment (SCP) reduction: The SCP will be phased in firstly for children under 6yrs by Dec 2020, then for children 6yrs and over at the end of 2022. For parents whose child turns 6yrs before the end of 2022 there will be a gap in payments, and they will find themselves with reduced income after getting used to an extra £10 per week.
- Single Parents who were already isolated and suffering from MHWB issues will be more vulnerable in 9/12 months' time. Continued support in this area will be a high priority. Access to more mental health services - many of which were being cut before this pandemic took place- will be needed for both adults and children.
- If our future is economic uncertainty and rolling lockdowns employers may rely even more heavily on short-term contracts to manage risk. Single Parents could move in and out of employment more frequently or find their hours cut.
- Single Parents will be at higher risk of isolation, experience greater financial stress and find it harder to access overstretched mental health services. The need for a high-quality employment service which includes single parent tailored provision will be massive.

In the longer term if government continues with an approach building on neoliberal economic systems and ideologies and prioritises economic growth, reduces market regulations and imposes strict austerity measures to curtail public debt, single parents will be one group facing increased poverty and inequality, declining family wellbeing and decreased life expectancy.¹¹

Opportunities for Single Parents over next 12 mths

It is very challenging to see positive opportunities over the coming period.

- Single Parent Families would benefit from the policy agenda proposed by the Wellbeing Economy Alliance¹². They offer 10 principles for responding to COVID-19 of which the following would specifically offer hope for single parents:
 - Policies to 'build back better' in response to COVID-19 by prioritising human health, wellbeing, and ecological stability in the long term.
 - Universal basic services which 'guarantee needs satisfaction for everyone, including through health care coverage for the whole population free of charge at point of access; universal free provision or vouchers for basic levels of water, electricity, gas, housing, food, mobility, education.'
 - Guaranteed livelihoods which ' ensures everyone has the means for decent living, for instance through income and/or job guarantees, redistribution of employment through working-time reduction'

¹¹ <https://wellbeingeconomy.org/wp>

¹² https://wellbeingeconomy.org/Wellbeing_Economics_for_the_COVID-19_recovery_10Principles.pdf

- Fair distribution which ‘creates more equal societies nationally and globally through a fair distribution of resources and opportunities. For example, more progressive and environmentally orientated income and wealth taxation; public/common ownership of key resources and infrastructure.’
- Government intervention to create new jobs over the short term which are inclusive, gender-balanced, and contribute to labour participation of women, people with disability, and excluded groups.
- An Equalities Impact Assessment of government recovery plans would add, among other things, a more precise accounting for the multiple disadvantages, and risks, faced by women, single parents, people with health conditions or disabilities and from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities.
- An investment in human capital programmes that support single parents to access training and further education and to find and retain fulfilling work. Newly unemployed people should get the quickest and best support available. However, we cannot forget single parents already facing disadvantages that are multiplying all the time. A ‘Fair Start for Single Parents’ employability programme tailored to meet the unique needs of single parents would be evidence of Scottish Government taking a crosscutting policy approach to child poverty.

Conclusion

Single parent family poverty and the impact of isolation and loneliness has been heightened by the pandemic and lockdown. As we move into the next phase the key emerging issues for single parents and children include poverty and low income; digital exclusion; early years and school age education and childcare; stress, isolation and the impact on family wellbeing including mental health.

Children and young people are not the face of this pandemic. But what is becoming clear is that they risk being among its biggest victims. While they have fortunately been largely spared from the direct health effects of COVID-19 - at least to date – the crisis is having an acute effect on their wellbeing. All children, of all ages, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that inadvertently are doing grave harm. This is a universal crisis, and, for some children, the impact will be lifelong.

Moreover, the harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally. They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations. The majority of single parents are women—the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening fragile gains on gender equality and women’s rights. As Scotland responds to the crisis, disaggregated data is critical to examine the differential impact on women and men towards evidence-based decision-making.

There is a need for OPFS to pause to think about all the aspects of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on single parents and OPFS as an organisation and to amend our strategic and operational plans accordingly. This work must draw explicitly on the feedback from single parents themselves. Both parents and children’s experiences during the crisis as well their views on how OPFS can improve the design and delivery of support, as well as feeding into how we as a country respond.

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