



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty

COVID-19

Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring Report



Issue 6 August 2020



Parents Experiences



Parents Experiences - Single Parent Proofing

COVID-19 is a global public health crisis which has also resulted in 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.

The majority of single parents are women in their mid-30's, so gender inequality is a key issue. Single parent families face twice the risk of poverty as couples - 48% compared to 26%. A third (36%) of all children in poverty in Scotland live in a single parent family.

We are extremely troubled about the impact of this crisis on every child affected by poverty. As a society, we should all be 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.



Parents Experiences

OPFS has developed a model of gathering the experiences of single parents through our local and national channels to capture key areas of concern. We use parents' experiences to feedback into OPFS response to the needs of parents, to policy makers and those in charge of service delivery to encourage responses that are 'single parent proofed'.

To ensure that we understand the impact of the crisis we have implemented a '**COVID-19 Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring System**'. OPFS gathers parents' experiences through our 5 local teams, our national advice and information service channels and website. We track and communicate key service responses and policy relevant issues arising from direct work with single parents.

There are five elements:



Impact knowledge: Parents experience is systematically collected and analysed



Monitoring Emerging Issues: Emerging issues are drawn out and highlighted



OPFS Response: Our services respond by working to meet the needs identified.



Dissemination and Communication: Impact information and emerging issues communicated to key influencers.



Single Parent Proofing: Using single parent feedback to inform the development, implementation and evaluation of policy and practice so that they respond effectively to the needs of single parents.





Parents Experiences

This report is based on feedback gathered across OPFS channels on single parent enquiries including:

- **OPFS Advice and Information services advisor daily highlights**
- **'Ask an advisor a question' on the website**
- **OPFS local community based services**

The content is organised by topic headings which mirror the OPFS website topic headings www.opfs.org.uk. Within these headings we report back on **key themes** arising from our contact with single parents across OPFS.

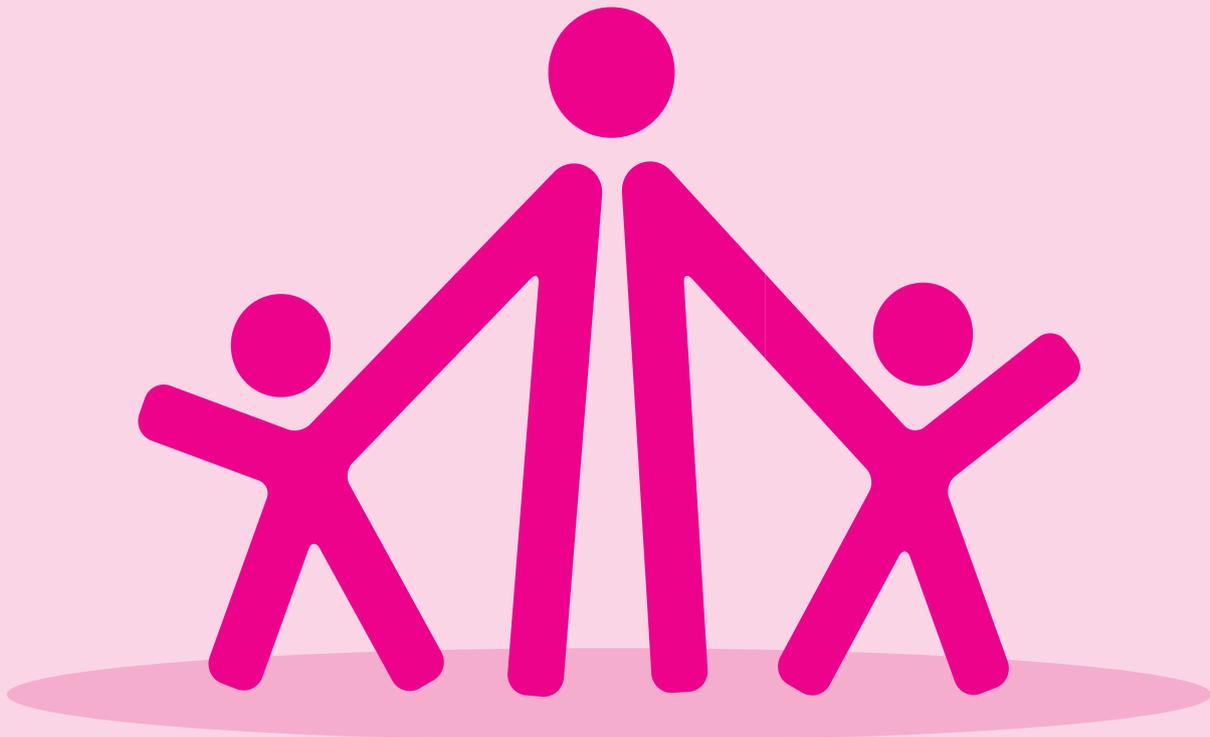




1. Health and Wellbeing

Stress, Anxiety and Mental Health

- Parents continue to report feeling stressed and anxious during phase 3 of lockdown. Main concerns include, the unknown risks of children returning to school and potential virus transmission, securing nursery places and the end to the furlough scheme.
- Backlogs to medical support and advice e.g. Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is a worry for parents.





2. Your Benefits

Universal Credit (UC)

- Parents struggle to make ends meet on UC.
- Parents raise issues of concerns about UC's associated capital rules, negotiation and settlement money, income threshold and conditionality.
- Parents are worried about any change of circumstances affecting their benefit claim.



I cannot afford to clothe and feed my children on Universal Credit. It is a real struggle.
(single parent)





Recurring questions include:

- How will my UC calculations be affected for going back to work with or without childcare?
- Who can claim UC and how is it affected by savings?
- What is the best way to apply for UC?
- Can I get an advance payment?
- Will my student income affect my UC payments?

Other Benefits

- Other benefit entitlement concerns highlighted: new Job Seekers Allowance, Housing Benefit, Child Benefit, Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Carers Allowance.



Caller is working 16 hours a week and receives Housing Benefit and Tax Credits for her children. She is thinking of starting a nursing degree and wanted to know how her tax credits and rent would be affected. (OPFS helpline)



A recurring question:

- What benefits am I entitled to claim while I am still at school?



3. Your Money

Financial Concerns & Poverty

- Worries around changes in circumstances and impact on Tax Credits or UC
- Rising levels of debt problems
- Digital poverty - parents continue to have a lack of access to IT equipment and Wi-fi
- Parents are requesting Best Start Grants
- Poverty - some parents have no money to buy the basics

“There continues to be many families struggling to make ends meet and requesting grants and we are sign posting to potential sources of help, for instance, applying for/managing benefits and problems with ex partners around maintenance.”

(Edinburgh Local Services Manager)

Recurring questions:

- Can I get help with the Warm Home Discount Scheme?
- Can I get help with my energy costs?
- How can I get help with childcare costs?





Digital Exclusion

- Lack of connectivity, hardware and IT skills continues to promote digital poverty amongst single parent families.



... we have continued to encounter and help families who don't have a computer in their home.

(Edinburgh Local Services Manager)



The following quotes reflect the gratitude of parents who have been gifted computers from OPFS,



That's amazing, we've been doing my son's schoolwork on my mobile phone. He's in high school and its, not ideal so this is amazing.

(single parent)



I can't believe it's really mine to keep. I can't thank One Parent Families enough for this. I'm really keen to get a job and this is going to help me so much.

(single parent)



This practical support means that families will have access to the internet through digital resources to actively engage with online resources.

A recurring question:

- Can I get help to buy another device so that my children can complete their school homework instead of sharing one laptop between them?



4. Support For You

Increased stresses on family relationships

“Single mum having problems with her son...coming back with Dad saying things about her. History of abuse... We talked through what mum could say to her son and I gave a link to our booklist on website... Also suggested Family Mediation...” (OPFS helpline)

“Her ex-partners controlling behaviour and contact arrangements when seeing their... baby. Caller feeling stressed dealing with her ex-partner’s parents as well. Told her about non harassment order.” (OPFS helpline)

• Coercive control - some parents are struggling to cope after recurring episodes of abuse from their partner.

“Her child’s father is very controlling and sending her text messages threatening to kill himself if she doesn’t take him back.” (OPFS helpline)

“Caller was feeling anxious as her ex-husband is still trying to control her although he has a new partner. She feels he is making allegations about her parenting skills and how this is affecting the children.” (OPFS helpline)



5. Separating/Being a Single Parent

Children - sole care responsibilities

- Parents continue to get in touch asking for positive parenting tips for effective parenting to provide a safe and caring space for their kids and guide them through their development
- Parents are worried about the risk of the virus spreading, schools having to close again and the prospect of balancing homeschooling with work and childcare commitments.
- Some parents are looking for family support when caring for their disabled child/children. They also need access to respite services.
- Parents are seeking help with finding and paying for childcare provision.

Case Study:

“My father did often help when I needed cover, and this gave me peace of mind for when I return to University. I have now been given a start date for October but unfortunately my father is now not in a position, to help with the childcare side of things and I now need to look after him as well.

I have tried several avenues looking for childminders but have had no luck in finding the right service as I would need my child cared for from seven in the morning and picked up from school for three days at the moment but this may increase . I was very stressed trying to access childcare and it felt like an impossible task and I worried that this would stop me from starting back at University.

I discussed my childcare problems with OPFS, and we talked about Flexible Child Care Services Scotland (FCSS) in the hope that they would be in a position, to offer the appropriate childcare I needed. I want a more settled routine for my daughter. I have now contacted FCSS and booked her a place for the 31st of August which I am really happy about because this will help to give a routine before I start back on my course”. (single parent)

Recurring questions

- How can I access a school clothing bank for my children returning to school?
- Are there any services that can help me with preparing and organising the school run?
- Can I get help to look after my youngest child?



6. Your home

- Housing issues



A single parent...has split with her partner due to domestic violence and wants to go back to her local area but is having problems getting suitable accommodation. (OPFS helpline)



- Homelessness concerns

Recurring questions:

- Can I get help with paying my rent?
- How can I get help to prevent being homeless when the Council/ Housing Associations have long waiting lists?
- Can I get help with housing if I leave my abusive partner?

7. Work / Education and Training

Employment Rights.

- With the furlough scheme coming to an end, some parents are starting to request help with finding employment.

Recurring questions include,

- When will OPFS employability services start again?
- How do I put in a grievance for workplace bullying?
- Will I have to quit my University course, or can I access financial support?





8. Your Children

Child contact & Child Maintenance

- Child maintenance concerns

For some parents the lack of financial support from their ex-partners leads to a poor standard of living and a struggle to provide for their children.

X and her husband have separated but still live in the same house. X has lost her job so has no money and her husband is refusing to support her and the children. (OPFS helpline)

Single mum asking about Child Maintenance Service as her ex-partner is self-employed and not declaring all his income. I... mentioned flagging up with MP/MSP and we also talked about reporting him to HMRC. (OPFS helpline)

Client has separated from her husband. She wanted to know what financial help was available, about maintenance and childcare. (OPFS helpline)

- Child contact concerns including, control over timings, abusive ex-partners not responding to letters from solicitors regarding contact. Some mothers fear that they will not get their children back after visits with their father.

Caller needed legal advice regarding contact. Her child's father is very controlling and sending her text messages threatening to kill himself if she doesn't take him back.. (OPFS helpline)



“Caller was having problems with her ex-partner and her daughter not wanting to go stay with the dad at weekends. Spoke about court orders and Child Maintenance. Also worried about school going back and emotional wellbeing. (OPFS helpline)”

“Caller has concerns about her son seeing his father. The father has mental health issues and has tried to commit suicide in the past... there are also concerns about the coronavirus as the father is travelling by bus to Scotland from London. Also discussed arrears of maintenance. (OPFS helpline)”

- Divorce and legal issues.
- Family law concerns.

“Caller was looking for family law advice for her partner... and not been seeing each other due to lockdown. She said his son’s mother is putting up barriers to contact.” (OPFS helpline)”

Recurring questions:

- How do I claim child maintenance?
- What are my contact rights?
- When will contact centres be open?
- How can I have contact with my child/children if the contact centres are closed?
- Do I need to keep paying child maintenance if I have sole custody of our child?
- What is Child Maintenance meant to cover?
- Does Child Maintenance include help with school clothing, or should you get extra financial support for this from the other parent?



Spotlight Issue: Dundee services during the COVID-19 Pandemic



OPFS offers single parents valuable support in a range of key areas such as,

- Finance
- Welfare rights
- Family support
- And employability

Pre-COVID-19, despite their financial problems many single parent families were managing to:

- Apply and successfully achieve employment
- Improve their self-confidence/their digital skills/ mental health and wellbeing
- Establish family routines.

The pandemic and unfolding lockdown restrictions have adversely impacted on maintaining these outcomes.

During this period, the staff in our Dundee office have been advising, directing and assisting single parent families through the challenges, uncertainties and growing anxieties resulting from the health crisis.





Case Study 1 – Single parent with two children.

“The hardest things have been dealing with the kids’ school-work as I have dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyspraxia and everyone’s mental health. I worry about the kids’ mental health. The lockdown had a big effect on us as a family. The uncertainty of what would happen next. I have seen changes in myself as it has affected my mental health mainly my anxiety. I feel as if I am on edge all the time, problems sleeping and have low energy. I have been able to get help by talking to people from OPFS...have been amazing over the phone.

The thing me and the kids are looking forward to is when we get a new home, we are going to use it as a fresh start for us all”.

The Dundee service provided practical support and reassurance to this single parent. This led to a reduction in the feelings of loneliness and sense of isolation.

Case Study 2 – Parent P

Single parent has two children. In the past, poor mental health has led to social services intervening and removing her children to a place of safety. The children are now back with her. The family situation was improving when COVID-19 struck. This led to a return of anxiety and depression due to the lockdown restrictions and the children losing out on school and nursery routines.

“I have really had to try to keep myself on an even keel. I have lost my routine too and my sleep pattern has been impacted. I have no routine and everyone’s sleep has been affected and this makes me feel worried. The routine was good for my mental health too and now there is nothing to plan, just staying home everyone gets bored and activities seem over very quick.

I received some food parcel deliveries early on arranged by OPFS ... this was organised through social work. I got some great activities through OPFS which was great for kids”.

The Dundee service provided a lifeline to this mother and her children. It offered much needed nutrition and stimulating activities which the family could enjoy together. This assistance helped them cope better with lockdown.



Case Study 3 - Single mother with a six-year old child

X has been working with OPFS since December 2019 after self-referring for support to improve her mental health. She suffered from anxiety and depression for around five years after leaving abusive husband and moving to a new city.

Almost overnight her mental health was negatively impacted by lockdown. She required a lot of reassurance and advice regarding the threat posed by the coronavirus. X had been managing her anxiety quite well until this time and required a lot of encouragement to keep going with the strategies she had found useful in the past. Her feelings of isolation increased, as the little contact she had with other adults disappeared. Support from OPFS changed from face to face contact to telephone calls and this meant that at times she had not been in contact with anyone apart from the team at OPFS for several weeks. During this time, X struggled to adapt to a new routine and was aware that this was impacting on her mental health and required support with this. She was at breaking point and became more and more frustrated.

She also found it challenging to home school her son. X was unable to use all the materials sent home by the school as many of the worksheets had to be printed off and did not have a printer. She needed a lot of reassurance and staff were supporting her to look at different ways to make teaching more fun without the use of technology.

She has been in contact with OPFS family support workers by calls, emails and texts and that has really helped her. Lockdown has been really stressful for this parent, but she can now see light at the end of the tunnel. Now she is looking forward to increasing her social contacts and returning to the activities she was engaging in before lockdown. She is aware of the positive impact this will have on her mental wellbeing.

The increased social isolation meant that this mother's mental health was badly affected, but the Dundee services provided valuable support in her time of need. Consequently, through adapting their support from face to face to telephone contact, the staff enabled her to strengthen her resilience and build confidence during this difficult time.



Observations

COVID-19 and its impact has been unprecedented in modern times. The last six months has severely tested single parents' resilience and impacted on families' wellbeing. Loss of education, rising levels of domestic violence and ongoing financial concerns are just some of the issues raised in this month's report exacerbated by the pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions.

OPFS was founded 76 years ago, a year before the end of the Second World War, another period of significant national crisis. In peace time, our organisation has never been relied upon to such an extent by single parents. Indeed, this month's spotlight showcasing our Dundee office, highlights the vital work which all our local services undertake day and daily. Akin to the war effort, OPFS has adapted and co-ordinated its community resources during this difficult time to ensure that the most vulnerable families do not feel abandoned. We must continue to provide solidarity and hope for those we work with through our practical interventions and one to one support.



One Parent Families Scotland

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