



One Parent Families Scotland

changing lives, challenging poverty

Response to COVID-19

May 2020

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OPFS Response to COVID-19



OPFS is the leading charity working with single parent families in Scotland, a quarter of all families. With 75 staff, we provide expert advice, practical support and campaign with parents to make their voices heard. OPFS gives support to over 7000 parents, children and young people each year through our national advice and information service, online information and resources, training for practitioners and local services in Edinburgh, Dundee, Glasgow, Falkirk and Lanarkshire.

For over 75 years we've been supporting single parent families find a way forward through difficult times. But never before has our service faced a challenge like the coronavirus pandemic. At a time when our service is more important than ever, we've had to make dramatic changes to ensure we can still be there for single parents and their children who need us. At the same time, we've had to stop giving face to face advice.

The **COVID-19** virus pandemic poses a unique challenge for single parents and their children as they depend on one income and don't have the support of another adult in the home to share childcare & parenting responsibilities. Government actions to limit the spread of the virus is putting enormous stress on single parents, having to deal with the realities of self-isolation and school and childcare closing. The consequences for families during this period of lock down and social distancing has increased anxiety for many parents and children that we support. Adding to this, school and nursery closures means that many single parents who struggle daily with the delicate balancing act of being able to earn and raise their children are placed under immense pressure, some thrown into poverty.

"My grand-daughter has come to live with me as her mum has had a breakdown, but I've no bed, no clothes for Katy, running out of money for food and fuel. I really don't know what I would have done if I hadn't called OPFS, without their help.... Even now I don't know what the future holds."

Grandmother now single parent kinship carer from Lanarkshire



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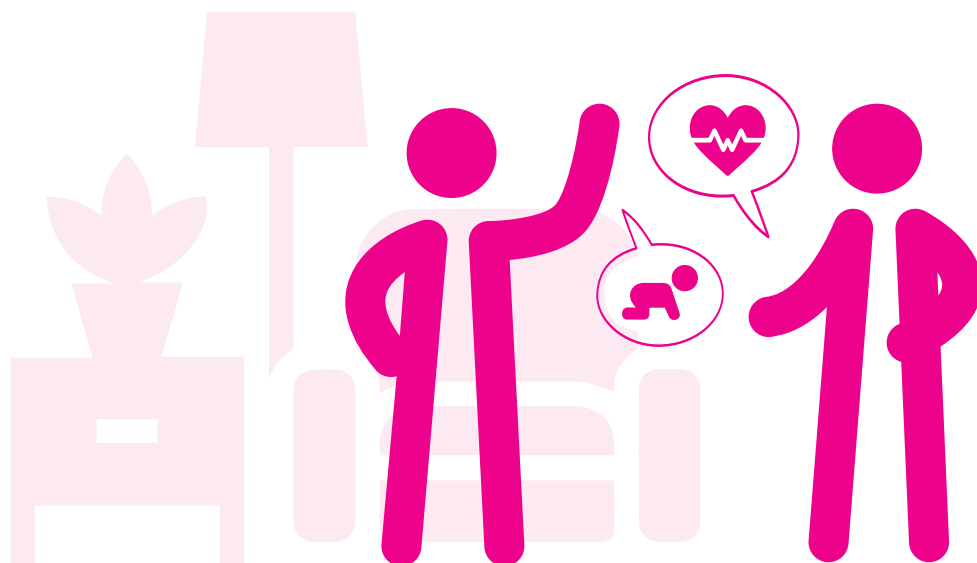
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As the primary, and often only, source of support for many single parents OPFS has seen a huge increase in parents reporting concerns and facing emergencies around food, fuel and mental health. It has therefore crucial that we reach out to all these families to offer ongoing support and reassurance. Thousands of single parents and their children are trapped at home on very low incomes, facing immense financial and mental health pressures.



Parents are worried about food and how to access local help. They are also concerned about their children's education, social development and mental health. Many don't have a computer or tablet and access to Wi-Fi to enable children to continue with on-line education; to be able to deal with Job Centre Plus and to do on-line shopping. Many only have a pay-as-you-go mobile. There is also the impact on single parents around: dealing with the non-resident parent under the lock down, closed childcare, being made unemployment, accessing benefits, the cost of living, worry about benefit conditionality, ability to do daily tasks and mental health.

And all this from one measure that is in place to tackle the spread of COVID-19. When you add to this all the other things such as supermarket restrictions, price hikes, increased use of social media (for news and updates), concerns around availability of health services for illness other than COVID-19, fears around lockdowns and most services closing to work from home, we recognise OPFS services need to be flexible, adaptable and available.



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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. 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.

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 Child.⁴



A third (36%) of all children in poverty in Scotland live in a single parent family¹



Almost half of children (50%) in single parent families live below the poverty line²



Before this crisis this was predicted to rise to over 62% by 2021³

Poverty and isolation have an impact on parent's and children's wellbeing, causing stress, anxiety and poor mental health. The challenge of being both sole carer and breadwinner has been magnified by the impact of the present COVID-19 crisis. We know from research by Caledonian University⁵ that 84% of single parents reported being lonely before lockdown. Isolation, loneliness and poverty have a significant impact on mental health - causing anxiety, low mood and depression.

1. <https://povertyinequality.scot/Poverty-Delivery-Plan-advice> p41 table 2

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

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

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

5. <https://www.opfs.org.uk/policy-doc/community-connections-briefing-papers/>



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Although all OPFS group work, face to face work, courses, training and counselling support are suspended we have responded by refocusing all services to respond to the new situation. Across OPFS there has been a dramatic increase in demand for our services including updated website advice pages, the freephone Lone Parent Helpline, live web chat, ask an advisor function and through our social media channels. Our local face to face and group-based services have faced the challenge of redeployment of staff to providing support using different channels. We aim to ensure that we are able to provide direct support to the many single parent families who are further isolated from their social networks.

As well as phone and text support for families we have established Digi-support groups and chats online, facilitated by OPFS staff. We have 'on the ground services' in 6 local authority areas and our Scottish wide freephone Lone Parent Helpline and digital presence supports thousands of single parents.



"I've worked since I was 18 but have lost my job and my 3 kids are stuck with me at home. I can't believe how hard it is to get help. To claim Universal Credit is really difficult and they can't say when I'll even get a payment. It's really desperate and how I'll cope I really don't know..." **Marie, single parent from Ayrshire**



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Local services

Although our local hubs are closed, **OPFS is still supporting hundreds of single parents** in each of the communities where we have services. The current crisis is having a devastating impact on families, so we have ramped up our information and advice services and still provide vital local support. In Edinburgh, Glasgow, Lanarkshire, Dundee and Falkirk...



we provide:

- One to one support to parents by mobile, text, email, Facebook, Facetime and WhatsApp.
- Advice on universal credit claims, benefit applications, money advice and housing.
- Information and advice on money, food, accessing medication, heating and lighting.
- Help with crisis applications for fuel, food and essential item items.
- Hints and tips on managing your worries.
- Ideas for activities for parents to do at home with the children.
- Up-to-date advice and referrals for access to local services & resources.

National services

OPFS provides a unique specialist information and advice service to single parents, practitioners and OPFS staff on key single parent issues. The service has responded and adapted to the changing circumstances caused by the COVID-19 ongoing emergency. Our new website has live chat, ask a question and a coronavirus hub. Information & Advice can be accessed through a new range of multi- channel options:

- **Lone Parent Freephone Helpline**
- **OPFS website**
- **Latest news pages**
- **Live webchat**
- **Ask an Advisor a question**
- **Helpline@opfs.org.uk**
- **OPFS Facebook**
- **OPFS Twitter**



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OPFS Making a Difference

Since lockdown began, we have experienced a 300% increase in calls to our Lone Parent Helpline and on-line chat. As a snapshot, over the first month of the pandemic **OPFS** services:



Delivered
1452
food parcels
to families

Supported over
8000
single parents
through accessing
online advice.

Accessed
essentials, clothing
and toys for
95
children
and babies.

Helped
259
families in crisis with
benefit claims and
immediate help.

Responded to
751
webchat messages
which enables single
parents to communicate
in real-time about
Coronavirus worries.



Processed
£100,000
worth of energy
grants to
2,000
families.

Set up a digital
fund of
£25,000
to support
digitally excluded
single parents.

Gave one to one
support over the
phone to
1189
parents

Dealt with around
650
inquiries over
all channels
(helpline, webchat,
AaQ, emails)

Held and
supported
29
Digi-group
meetings



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Parents Experiences



This is a continually evolving situation and OPFS will keep on top of announcements in order to inform parents and practitioners in areas of importance. We are also taking information coming from the ground to feedback up into policy makers and those in charge of service delivery to ensure responses are 'single parent proofed'. In this new situation we are gathering information about the experiences single parents are facing through our local and national channels.

In response to the crisis we have implemented a new **'COVID-19 Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring System'**. This enables us to gather in all we can from parents through our 5 local teams and our national advice and information service channels. We are now tracking and communicating key service response and policy relevant issues to OPFS policy team arising from direct work with single parents.

"The effect of the lack of money and everyday pressures of the virus, while also having sole responsibility for your family's health and wellbeing are immense. I am on my own and as the only adult in the home I worry about who will look after my children if I get ill." **Mark, single parent from Falkirk**

There are 4 elements:

- **Impact knowledge:** Data from parents is systematically collected and analysed.
- **Monitoring Emerging Issues:** Arrangements are in place to monitor policy impacts and highlighting emerging issues
- **Dissemination and Communication:** Impact information and emerging issues communicated to key influencers
- **Policy Response:** OPFS policy response to parents experience which informs our campaign priorities

We have gathered feedback on some of the key issues single parents are experiencing through the early days of the lock down through our local and national channels.



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COVID-19 Emergency: Key Themes



More and more families face urgent issues and are in crisis. The key themes are:

1. Universal credit and other benefits

- Fear of continuing job search obligations and sanctions
- Difficulties accessing benefits especially UC
- Financial uncertainty and problems with benefits are causing a lot of stress and anxiety.

2. Employment rights

- Self-employment; having to work & childcare; sick pay.
- A lot of parents find it impossible to work from home, which causes a lot of worries for their jobs & income

3. Financial concerns and poverty

- Energy debt, credit card debt, overdraft and owing money to 'loan sharks'.
- Paying housing costs- rent, council tax, mortgage.
- Worry about being made homeless.
- Families already in poverty feel they are sinking even deeper

4. Children - Sole carer responsibilities

- Most parents have no childcare and feel very worried about what will happen to their children if they fall sick, as they have nobody else to help.
- A lot of worry and anxiety with schoolwork.
- The news and the rapid changes are causing children anxiety and parents have to deal with this on their own
- Parents from different areas saying supermarkets stopping SPs taking their children in to buy essentials. Some local authorities, when assessing the childcare for key workers, asking about partner's key worker status without the option to say there is no partner.

5. Loneliness, social isolation and essential services

- Trapped in the home with children and no adult company
- Lack of access to key services and support.
- No family or friends nearby to help.



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Covid-19 Emergency: Key Themes



6. Access to information about Covid - 19

- Lack of access to clear information about guidelines.
- Parents feel bombarded with information - on TV and internet (if they have access).

7. Stress, anxiety & impact on mental health

- Increasing anxiety and impact of stress whilst managing alone at home with children on mental health. Many parents OPFS work with locally have lost any emotional and practical support they were getting. Now they have to care for too many people and take care of too many things so feel mentally & physically exhausted as they're on their own. This lack of emotional support is affecting even parents with no previous mental health problems, as the parents miss their own support network.
- A lot of parents suffering with sleep problems.
- Some black and ethnic minority single parents have specific concerns as many came here as asylum seekers; no one to turn to; no support and suspicious of state services.
- Some families are being inundated with welfare calls from schools which, in reality, is only adding to the family's stresses as the calls offer no practical support.

8. Lack of access to food

- Most parents don't want to take their children to shops with them to avoid social contact, but don't have childcare either.
- Parents are worried about not having enough money to buy what is left in the shops as the cheaper brands are going first.

9. Access to healthcare and essential items (prescriptions, medication, top-ups)

- Getting medication for the family can be difficult, esp. when the parent has a mental health problem & struggles going outside or cost of travel if taking all the children. Concerns about top up for utilities e.g. fuel.
- Parents who have long term and enduring mental health issues are being impacted by anxiety and uncertainty about what is currently happening, this is further impacted by the lack of services and family members withdrawing.



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Covid-19 Emergency: Key Themes



10. Child Contact & Child Maintenance

- Single parents concern about children's physical contact with the non-resident parent and moving between households. This is causing high levels of concern, anxiety and real fear for some parents.
- Single Parents reporting child maintenance in arrears but not being pursued by the Child Maintenance Service.

11. Digital exclusion

- A lot of parents request help with broadband and iPads for their kids to allow them to do their homework while self-isolating. The majority of parents we support don't have laptops or PC's and access the internet using 'pay as you go' mobile phones.

12. Increased stresses on family relationships

- Family arguments have been increasing. Children displaying challenging behaviour as they are unable to get out of the house. For some families just surviving the next few months together will be a real struggle.

Based on this we are calling for government at all levels to **recognise the diversity of families, including single parent proofing**, when implementing policy and designing services in response to the COVID-19 crisis .

We also calling for an **emergency package of measures** that increases family incomes, reduces household costs, and supports parents to provide continuity in play and learning at home.



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Emergency Package Recommendations



UK Government

We are asking the UK government to set out an emergency package of support for children and families on low income including:

1. Child benefit, benefit cap and the two-child limit

- Emergency support for families with children, with a £10 increase in child benefit as the top priority as this would reduce child poverty by 5%⁶ and the permanent removal of the benefit cap and the two-child limit.

2. Universal credit (UC) & Legacy benefits

Changes to UC and legacy benefits that will directly benefit families

- **Benefit conditionality:** Job seeking requirements in legacy benefits and UC should be suspended.
- **UC £20 increase:** The £20 increase for UC and working tax credits means there are many single parents who are staying on legacy benefits who won't get the advantage of the extra £20.

However, if they move to UC will still lose out especially if under 25yrs. The £20 increase should be added to the standard allowance for Income Support, ESA and JSA as well as UC.

- **Young single mothers:** Single Mothers under 25yrs get a reduced UC standard allowance rate, even though they have the same costs as older mothers. Remove the 'young single mother penalty' - they should be paid the same standard allowance for UC as parents over 25yrs.
- **UC 5 week wait and advance payments:** The five-week wait for UC should end when administratively possible and advance payments should be an automatic grant - even if it is only an estimate of entitlement.
- **Deductions from Universal credit and Legacy benefits:** Benefit penalties and the recovery of advances by deduction from UC should be immediately suspended (as is with overpayments, Social Fund loans and Tax Credit debts).
- **Housing benefit:** Raise the Local Housing Allowance to cover the average cost of private sector rents in an area.

6. Bradshaw J and Keung A (2020) Poor children need a coronavirus bonus, York: Social Policy Research Unit.



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Emergency Package Recommendations



UK Government

3. Digital exclusion

At a time of social disconnection during a national crisis, parents and children need to be able to get online to stay connected and safe. We want Government and the partners in digital infrastructure to create an open and free to use wireless network to enable people in low income communities to get online.

We support the calls from 'Operation WIFI'⁷ that the UK government should:

- Open up the domestic BT Open Zone, Virgin and others who provide the broadband infrastructure so that hotspots can be used free of charge for the period of coronavirus.
- To enable those on pay-as-you-go and rolling monthly tariffs to have their data limits lifted to unlimited data so that they can use their phones as hotspots to access the internet.

4. Parental leave

The UK government have announced that people unable to work because of caring responsibilities arising from the coronavirus epidemic are now eligible for furlough. Those who cannot work - including from home - because they need to look after children or a vulnerable individual in their household have been advised to speak with their employer about being placed on temporary leave.

- We would urge that Single Parents should be a named group in the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme given their sole responsibility for their children.
- We are calling on government to encourage employers to support single parents whose children are at home, allowing single parents some flexibility in how they do their hours

7. <https://operationwifi.co.uk/>



Emergency Package Recommendations



UK Government

5. Child maintenance

Children have the right to be supported by both parents - this is particularly vital during this time of crisis when many single parents' and their children face increasing poverty. It is clear that COVID-19 will often have an adverse impact on both parents' finances. Some non-resident parents have stopped or reduced the amount they pay towards their child's upkeep. The Child Maintenance Service is now accepting verbal evidence over the phone, with no verification required. It is crucial that single parents do not face losing the child maintenance payments they rely on to make ends meet - a fifth of families are lifted out of poverty by child maintenance payments.

We believe government should intervene during this period to make up any shortfall in child maintenance not being paid by non-resident parents and guarantee payment, without impacting



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Emergency Package Recommendations



Scottish Government

As families' lives are turned upside down by the crisis, we welcome the range of support that Scottish Government is providing to help families cope during these unprecedented times. However, there are some key areas where we feel more can be done.

We are asking Scottish Government to set out an emergency package of support for children and families on low income that: **increases family incomes through strengthening the safety net; reduces household costs and inequalities at home to prevent a widening of the 'attainment' gap and supports parents to provide continuity in play and learning at home and safeguard family wellbeing.**



8. www.gov.scot/every-child-every-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-22



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Emergency Package Recommendations



Scottish Government

1. Increasing family incomes through strengthening the safety net

Extra financial support for families is essential to ensure Scotland's poorest children will not be left cold, hungry and but supported through the crisis. Some families are particularly affected - those priority families identified in the child poverty delivery plan, Every Child, Every Chance⁸ - lone parents, families with a disabled adult or child, young mothers, minority ethnic families, families with a child under 1, and larger families. Many single parents will be stressed with claiming universal credit and will struggle with delayed first payments, insufficient benefit income and a range of problems with the administration of uc and other benefits such as disability benefits.

Fast-tracking of the Scottish child payment would be an ideal response, but we recognise the logistical difficulties obstacles whilst welcoming the continued priority Ministers are placing on delivery. In the meantime, we are asking the Scottish Government to introduce an emergency package. Some options include:

- **Scottish Welfare Fund:** Further investment in the Scottish welfare fund to provide a coronavirus crisis grant equivalent to at least £10 per week, per child for all families with children who are on a qualifying benefit (bringing forward the equivalent of the Scottish Child Payment for the duration of the crisis)
- **Best Start Grant:** Introduce a new/increased payment using best start grant legislation and payment systems.
- **Best Start Foods.** Currently, the amount is set at £17 every four weeks for children 1-3 yrs. This amount could be doubled for example. The upper age limit should be increased as it was based on the expectation that 3yr olds would have access to free meals through expanded nursery provision, which is now suspended.



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Emergency Package Recommendations



- **Discretionary Housing Payments:** Increase the DHP budget and direct local authorities to target additional funds towards those affected by the benefit cap. This would provide vital additional support to many of the families most severely affected by working-age benefit changes. By increasing the DHP budget, the benefit cap could be fully mitigated.
- **School Clothing Grants:** Increase school clothing grant payments, to cover the realist cost by a standard amount across Scotland.
- **Carers Allowance:** 16% of single parents have a child with a disability whom they care for. Carers in Scotland, who receive Carer's Allowance, get £74.85 per week. This includes a £8.70 per week carer supplement (which applies to Scotland only). We would like to see a significant permanent increase in the weekly supplement.
- **Other local government powers:** Local authorities have powers to provide payments to advance the wellbeing of children, for example under s22 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 or via financial support under the power in s20 of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. These could be used to provide equivalent financial support, particularly to families with no recourse to public funds.
- **Access to advice on social security:** Many parents who are on low income will not have access to wifi to get on-line help with benefit claims, problems with benefits and family finances. They would usually visit a CAB or advice centre for help. With this option gone, organisations offering family support who are continuing to work with families who are digitally excluded in local communities need to be resourced to support families to access this advice.



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Emergency Package Recommendations



Scottish Government

2. Minimising inequalities in the home, reducing household costs

Everything possible should be done to reduce household costs during. Children living in poverty are likely to fall behind their peers in many aspects of their development.⁹ Government must intervene to ensure that this crisis doesn't worsen these inequalities. Families are facing extra costs of children being at home and many will be living on a reduced income during the crisis. Money given to local authorities to help those affected by the COVID-19 virus should include a focus on support to single parents and their children. Options include the following:

- **School Meals:** Free school meals are a crucial lifeline for children ensuring they get decent, hot food every day. With schools and nurseries now closed, no child should be hungry. Packed lunches and their distribution are a complex option. Cash payments are much more flexible than vouchers and will ensure families are able to obtain the food they need in a dignified and non-stigmatising way. Some councils are making payments that are higher than others. This cannot be right.

We welcome Scottish Government encouraging local authorities to provide cash transfers directly to all eligible families. Scottish Government should reinforce this message with local authorities and strongly encourage cash transfers over other schemes and to work with COSLA to encourage LA's to make cash payments to families as a replacement for school meals. These payments should all be at the same level, so all children are treated equally. Local authorities should be supported to provide help to families to cover the costs of meals during what would have been school holidays.

- **Utility Bills:** With families spending far more time at home, utility bills will rise considerably. Over 600,000 households in Scotland already live in fuel poverty, so the impact of this could be devastating for family finances and on quality of life. Scottish Government should work with utility providers to introduce a freeze on utility bills for households experiencing poverty. Lump-sum payments, like a seasonal grant, could also provide families with the financial support they need to ensure a warm and damp-free home.

9. www.healthscotland.scot/childrens-social-circumstances-and-educational-outcomes-briefing-paper.pdf



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Scottish Government

- **Digital and device access:** Many single parents on low incomes only have a 'pay as you go' mobiles. A lack of digital skills, equipment and access already has a hugely negative impact on single parent lives. There is an urgent need for access to either tablets or laptops as well as Wi-Fi and help with mobile costs. School and nursery closures across Scotland mean that children are now expected to learn at home. We welcome Scottish Government tasking SCVO with ensuring digital inclusion for all. In addition, a consistent, centralised national effort is required to ensure access for all, and greater urgency is required to support vulnerable children. Within this, families with children must be prioritised to ensure they have the online connectivity and devices they need during the crisis. Beyond this, government should support families with ongoing costs of accessing digital tools and putting pressure on providers to freeze bills. Families also need training on using devices.

3. The wider impact for families living in poverty

- **Support parents with children's learning at home:** Some families face balancing caring for their children and working at

home as well as those in lock down with little or no money. Giving parents reassurance over their finances and enabling learning at home could go a long way to support families. Parents and carers should receive appropriate advice about supporting play and learning at home. Government should work with partners and third sector organisations to ensure physical resources reach families who need them.

- **Early learning and childcare provision:** In response to dealing with this crisis, the statutory duty for councils to double the entitlement has been revoked. When the crisis is over it will be low-income families dependent on childcare who will be most affected. We know childcare will be essential to the country's economic recovery. Scottish Government should work with partners, including the third sector to make early learning and childcare a 'first priority' so that parents and childcare providers emerge ready for what's ahead. At the soonest possible opportunity, Scottish Government should communicate with parents the timetable for when the expansion will be delivered and ensure the childcare needs of priority groups are met, including single parent families.



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What we want to achieve



A 'single parent proofed' policy is a 'family proofed' policy.

Government at all levels should recognise the diversity of families, including 'single parent proofing' when implementing policy and designing services in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Single parents, most of whom are women, face specific challenges in keeping their head above water through these times of extreme difficulty. Most single parents are single-handedly juggling supporting their children's needs at home in lock-down. They are also more at risk of multiple disadvantages, such as low qualifications, limited work experience, low self-confidence, debt, housing problems, ill health, disability and of ongoing coercive control from a previous partner.

If we listen to and involve parents, then their direct evidence of experience highlights new issues and new connections. The challenges and problems that single parent families confront



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What we want to achieve

The COVID-19 pandemic is both a health crisis and economic one. The NHS is dealing with the former, the social security system should be the safety net for the latter. For decades the political priority has been to restrict social security spending combined with punitive measures such as the benefit cap, 2-child policy and benefit penalties. What has now become clear is that a decent social security system is not optional, its vital.

Money in parents pockets matters - research shows its impact on children's education and health, and how it makes parenting easier. Social security has a crucial role to play in reducing child poverty among both out-of-work and in-work families. That will be even more important now, as financial pressures increase - yet children's benefits have been ignored in government's support package.

It is time for a social security system that prevents poverty, treats people with dignity and respect and supports everyone to flourish.¹⁰



10. Scottish Campaign on Rights to Social Security - Principles for Change



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changing lives, challenging poverty

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