



**One Parent  
Families Scotland**

*changing lives, challenging poverty*

**COVID-19**

# Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring Report



**Issue 9 November 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%<sup>1</sup>. A third (36%) of all children in poverty in Scotland live in a single parent family<sup>2</sup>.

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.

<sup>1</sup> <https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Measuring-Poverty-2020-1.pdf>

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



## 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](http://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 feel overwhelmed and confused about new COVID-19 rules and have a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of single parents and their families.

**I have mental health problems caused from years of coercive behaviour from my ex-partner.**

**I feel very lonely when my children are in bed. Is there a service which allows me to speak to someone in the evening?**





## 2. Your Benefits

### Universal Credit (UC)

- Problems with UC calculations
- The waiting time for UC payments continuing to cause financial hardship

### Recurring questions include:

- How much can I claim?
- How can I get an advance payment?
- What are my work requirements under UC?
- What is the waiting time?

**“ I am on UC and have a young child, but I am still struggling financially. I cannot pay my heating bills. Where can I get help with this? ”**

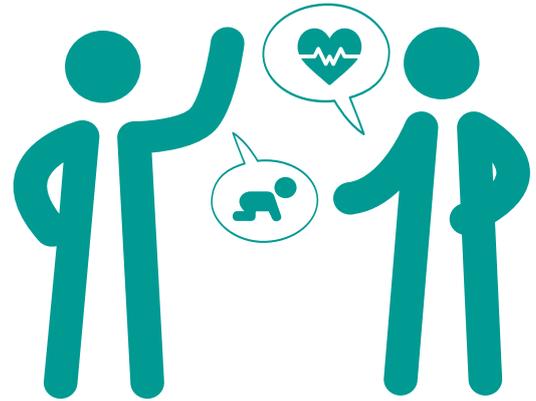
**“ If I went back to work 30 hours a week, how much UC would I get and could I get help towards rent and childcare. How much would that be? ”**

**“ I have recently separated from my ex-partner. How do I apply for UC? ”**

**“ I have two young children and on UC, but I am finding it hard to cope financially. Where can I get help with this? ”**



## 3. Your Money



### Financial Concerns & Poverty

- Food and fuel poverty
- Parents continue to need help with accessing Christmas presents
- Parents struggle paying their energy bills
- Parents require help to pay rent

### Recurring questions include:

- I have recently been made redundant - where can I access help to get money to live on?
- I am waiting on the Early Learning Grant - do you know how long it takes to be paid?
- I am hoping to start a full time Post Graduate Course next year – what help can I get from SAAS and UC?
- How much does a divorce cost?
- How do I apply for Carers Allowance and how much is it?
- When can I apply for the Best Start Grant payment and how much is it?
- Are there any Grants that I can apply for apart from the Best Start payment?
- Can I get help with paying my energy costs?



“ My hours have been reduced because of COVID-19 and although I have informed HMRC to adjust my tax credits I do not have enough money for Christmas. Where can I get help with this? ”

“ I am thinking of separating from my ex-partner and I am on Disability Living Allowance. Can I get help with my rent? ”

“ I have a child off school self-isolating. I have had a benefit check and I am getting what I am entitled to, but I do not have enough money to live on? ”

“ I am feeling overwhelmed with worry about COVID-19 and the cost of Christmas. I feel a failure as I cannot afford to buy Christmas presents. ”

## 4. Support For You

### Increased stresses on family relationships

- Some parents are finding it hard to cope with their children's behaviour on their own without family support due to COVID-19 restrictions.
- Domestic abuse continues to be raised.





## 5. Separating / Being a single parent

### Children - Sole Care responsibilities

- Problems experienced with arrangements for child contact with the non-resident parent.
- Some parents continue to ask for help with resourcing activities for their children to help keep them occupied and safe during the pandemic.
- Worries and concerns by new mums giving birth during the pandemic, unsure of what support is available to them.
- Some parents continue to report difficulties disciplining their older children.

### Recurring questions include:

- How do I find out if I can get Legal Aid?
- My son has autism and behavioural problems. Who can I talk to about setting boundaries for him?
- How can I find suitable childcare?

**“My son was ill recently and off school but now I do not want him to go back to school as I am worried about the virus. Will I be fined?”**

**“I am separating from my ex-partner and do not know what to say to the children. Can I get support with this?”**





## 6. Your home

- Some parents continue to feel concerned about fear of becoming homeless.

### A recurring question:

- Can I get help with my mortgage?

## 7. Work / Education and Training

### Recurring questions include:

- How do I know my employer is giving me the correct redundancy payments?
- I am thinking of increasing my hours at work and I am still on tax credits: will this mean I need to change to UC?

“I am having to stay off work because my child has to self-isolate due to someone at school. I cannot work from home. What are my employment rights, and can I get financial help while I am at home for 14 days?”



## 8. Your Children

### Child contact & Child Maintenance

- Parents continue to report problems accessing child maintenance payments.
- Child contact concerns remain an issue for many parents.
- Legal - Parental Rights and Responsibilities issues.

### Recurring questions include:

- How do I use the Child Maintenance service?
- Where can I get advice regarding receiving child maintenance from my ex-partner?
- Where can I get help on arranging child contact arrangements?

“ How can my daughter get child maintenance from her ex-partner for their child? ”

“ My ex-partner is pushing for more contact with our daughter but has no parenting skills and I would not feel happy leaving her with him. He does not have parental rights and responsibilities, but I am frightened he might come for her. He lies, is nasty and shows little interest... ”

“ Where can I get advice on how to sort my child maintenance payments given the history of domestic abuse? ”



## Spotlight: Child Poverty - Falkirk Services

The Falkirk services include:

- Early years provider for children aged two to three who are entitled to free childcare.
- One-to-one support to parents by telephone, text, email, Facebook, Facetime and WhatsApp.
- Advice on Universal Credit claims, Benefit Applications, Money Advice and Housing.
- Information and advice on money, food, 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 you can do at home to keep you and your family occupied.

[See further information.](#)

Due to the impact of COVID-19, service delivery has meant that previous practices have had to change. In Falkirk for instance, family groups and hubs now take place predominantly online. The service has also devised help videos to offer advice, information and top tips.





“As parents and children are not permitted to be inside the Family Centre, we can no longer run our weekly groups such as Family, Food & Fun, Gardening Group and so on which parents and children greatly benefitted from and enjoyed. We decided the best way to support parents digitally was through our existing Facebook Page. We have done this in a variety of ways. We have spent time searching for anything to share or post that we think parents would benefit from hearing about or getting information on, such as, links to government grants, tips on potty training, and dealing with temper tantrums. We have also recorded, edited and uploaded videos of staff delivering content to spark the interest of parents. These videos included five sessions of baby massage which were uploaded once per week, a play at home and messy play ideas and a sleep tips video. Limited start up packs for baby massage and bedtime routine packs were also available for parents to collect safely from the Centre. We are now planning video sessions for book bug, cooking and further information around parenting and life skills. Additionally, we are beginning small zoom groups with parents too.

(Family Support Worker)

Engaging and working with families remains the main priority despite adjustments to the way services are run. Falkirk staff have been in regular contact with parents providing a friendly voice at the end of the phone, offering fun activities to keep children busy and giving practical advice and support on a range of issues. Outreach and family support workers would normally conduct home visits, provide direct care or offer car share with clients to meet appointments.”



**Mother who was due to attend the hospital for her pre-op: she had to self-isolate for two weeks prior to the appointment and was advised that she should not use public transport for this trip. Our service ended up booking and funding a taxi to the hospital for her. (Outreach Worker)**

**Childcare Services - we have had to learn quickly and there is a constant worry that we may not be abiding to some rules. For example, we thought reading stories on Facebook would encourage parents to read to their children at bedtime. However, we learned that the copyright rules are very strict, and most books cannot be used. Also, when setting up a private Facebook page we needed to ask, who can see it, what do we do once children leave, are we allowed to post pictures of all children, what consent do we need. This adds to the time we have available each day and there is no extra funding. (Falkirk Manager)**

**I have been supporting a parent with three children since the beginning of lockdown through phone calls. I have had several calls with her to give advice and support around her mental health and wellbeing. When she reported issues with housing repairs, I helped to sort this out and encouraged her to follow through with this herself. I have provided activities for her children to help keep them occupied and safe during the pandemic. I am currently putting in a request to another area for a package of support for the family at Christmas as she lives out with our local area. Lastly, I have also ensured that the mother received nursery placements for her children.**

**(Family Support Worker)**



They have now had to adjust their practices and adopt a more flexible approach, for example,

Clearly, the pandemic has forced staff to be more proactive and use creative methods to best reach, serve and support parents. The use of phone calls has been a positive form of support for parents providing a friendly voice, helping to assess need ensuring that they are connected in with services, albeit at a distance and helping to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The following three case studies exemplify the kind of positive outcomes achieved by our Falkirk services.

### **Case Study 1 – Mother with New-born**

*Parent D was referred to our service by her health visitor after she had suffered from post-natal depression. This had led to her trying to take her own life. She had accessed mental health services while in hospital but once discharged the health visitor had struggled to find any follow-up services due to the current COVID-19 restrictions. Parent D was also going through a chaotic marriage break up and required support with this. We agreed to accept the referral.*

*Initial phone contact proved difficult and it was agreed that a family support worker would meet up with Parent D on a one-to-one basis in a local cafe following current guidelines and safe work practices around COVID-19. This proved to be successful as it not only allowed a more person-centred support, but it also encouraged Parent D to get out and about and back into the community. Something that she had not done since her discharge from hospital.*

*Over the next few weeks, our worker met up with Parent D and supported her with looking at her housing options. This had been difficult as the father had refused to leave the family home resulting in Parent D having to move into her parents' small overcrowded flat with her baby, where they both had been living in a box room.*

*We also assisted this parent with making the transition from a working income to moving onto benefits and explained the changes that this would involve. Child maintenance payment options were also discussed as nothing had yet been set up. In line with this, the family support worker*



At the outset this mother faced the bleak prospect of becoming a new parent alone, whilst, also having to navigate the additional pressures of poor mental health. However, after engaging with the team in Falkirk, Parent D has started to turn her life around, helping to build and sustain resilience and confidence during this arduous time.

## **Case Study 2 – Mother with Three Children**

*Parent P was having issues around her parenting of her nine-year-old son and was referred to OPFS by social services. The mother experienced feelings of isolation because of COVID-19 and the prospect of tightening of restrictions. The son is struggling academically at school, causing mum additional stress. He awaits a proper diagnosis of his behavioural support needs and he is currently using the CAMHS service.*

*Parent P disclosed that lockdown has made her feel isolated as she is not getting to see any friends and has no family living locally to help. She has had to give up her job to be able to look after her children, during lockdown, which has also added to her low mood. Additionally, the children's father is looking for child contact. This had previously been stopped as he had been both physically and mentally abusive towards his children.*

### **Interventions and solutions**

*We have started work on parenting strategies via phone and door-step visits and have started to implement strategies and boundaries to try and maintain a consistent approach to parent her children, particularly her son. This work continues to be ongoing.*

*We have given a laptop to the family and six months of Wi-Fi access to enable mother to establish and maintain online contact with friends and family. It is hoped that this will continue to reduce feelings of social isolation and enable her to feel more connected. We have also advised mother to seek mediation and to contact local social services to link up with more access advice and support regarding organising supervised contact for the children so they can see their dad in a safe environment. Video contact has also been discussed for the children with their dad, so that some sort of communication can be organised. Again, this is ongoing work.*



*Since these changes have been brought in Parent P has described her home to be a more positive place with a better atmosphere. She has stated that she feels better about herself and especially when communicating with her children, even though this is still early days.*

*The laptop has made a big difference to the mother's mental health and wellbeing as she can now maintain contact beyond her three children. The Wi-Fi was very welcome too, as she had previously had their home internet connection cut off.*

*From a professional perspective, and although early days, son appears to be more settled and communicates in a calmer and more measured manner. Mother's concerns are not yet resolved but with ongoing support has the potential to gain better control of her situation and own mental health and wellbeing.*

This case study demonstrates staff's determination to explore creative solutions for single parents while also mitigating any delays they experience in receiving interventions from other support agencies. Parent P had difficulty in finding the right balance between disciplining her children and caring responsibilities. The team helped to build her confidence in this area. They gave her doorstep support and the IT equipment allowed her to stay in touch with family and friends which reduced her sense of isolation. Consequently, Parent P has developed greater resilience to cope with these challenging times.





### Case Study 3 – The Family Support Worker perspective

*During my time as a student social worker at OPFS I have had to adapt to the new ways of supporting parents due to COVID-19 in a way which I have found can bring both benefits and limitations to my own practice. I have been working with a young parent supporting her with move into her own tenancy with her 3-year-old daughter. Moving to a new area, the mother was interested in moving her daughter to a nursery that was closer to her new home. We applied for this together but found that due to the strain and backlog of services due to pandemic, we found ourselves waiting a considerable amount of time to hear back about a transfer. Consequently, the wait negatively impacted the child's ability to attend nursery as mother does not drive. With the restrictions on non-indoor meetings with others and not being able to car share meant, I had to find new ways of meeting with and providing support. For example, as mentioned, this parent cannot drive.*

*Therefore, we planned to meet in local cafes as the mother was anxious on using public transport during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the restrictions offered us new benefits to explore. One way was to take full advantage of meeting in the outdoors, for instance, most going for a socially distanced walk around the mother's local area. By meeting up outside we were able to explore her new local area, do some physical exercise and find nice parks and walks that she could then take her daughter to in the future. This afforded the opportunity to improve mental health and wellbeing whilst also reducing feeling of social isolation. As a worker the COVID-19 restrictions enabled me to think more creatively on ways to support this parent which helped to mitigate against some of the negative effects of living through a lockdown.*

The meetings outdoors have helped to improve this parent's mental health and wellbeing by taking advantage of walks and exercise. This family support worker grasped the opportunity to think 'outside the box' by changing the conventional meeting arrangements to an outside location and a different setting. During the pandemic, family support workers have sustained their engagement with single parents and increased positive outcomes through innovative thinking, as this case clearly demonstrates.

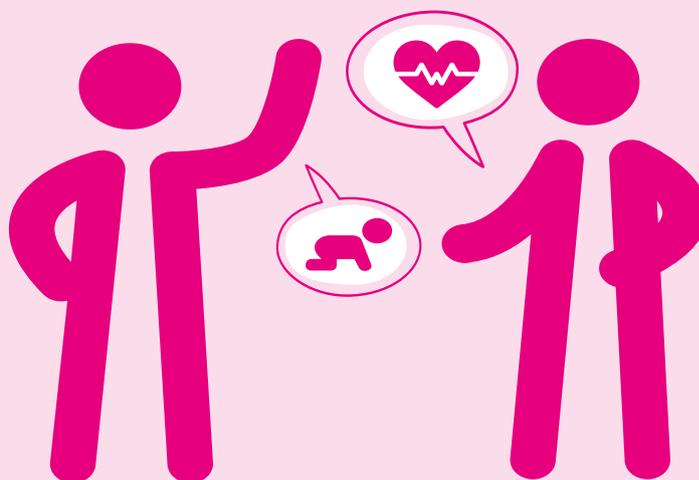


## Case Study 4: Falkirk Manager on Childcare Issues for Parents and Staff

*As a manager I constantly worry about staff's own children being sent home and requiring childcare and trying to staff sessions with a member of staff being unavailable or them needing to self-isolate. As a third sector organisation we do not have the funding to have supply staff on standby nor do we have a large enough staff team to merit having staff on standby.*

*However, the plus side is that parents have staff around if they have any concerns or need support with anything. We have been able to talk to parents about the grants available and distribute technology to those who need it the most. We are also seeing parents who require additional support and as such we can assist with this. We are also receiving better feedback from our parents about their children's experiences in the nursery which has been useful. We are using our mobile phones so we can send pictures of new children at play if parents are worried about their children settling in. This has been useful to provide reassurances that children are doing well.*

Like other aspects of the Falkirk service, childcare provision in nursery has had to adapt practices to ensure that children are coping well and working through any problems with parents via mobile phones. When necessary staff can show evidence to parents to reassure and alleviate any worries that they may have.





## Observations

After a year of great hardship and uncertainty, there is a collective sense of relief within society that COVID-19 vaccines are due to be rolled out in the coming weeks. It gives us all hope and cautious optimism for the future.

This COVID-19 monthly summary report is the last one of 2020. Looking back over the last ten months we note from each successive monthly briefing that this pandemic has exacerbated already difficult circumstances for single parents and their families. Likewise, it has challenged key workers within OPFS to re-evaluate and adapt our approach to service delivery. Despite the challenges, including socially distancing and closed offices, the organisation has continued to achieve person centred outcomes for parents. The Falkirk Services, as noted in this report's spotlight section, demonstrate that as an organisation we are doing well in this respect by continuing to respond creatively to the needs of single parents.

Nevertheless, the pandemic's challenges remain. We must continue to sustain and develop people's resilience to get through each day and the weeks and months ahead. We hope that 2021 will bring greater health, peace of mind and financial security to all those who receive our services and all those who work in them. Merry Christmas!



# One Parent Families Scotland

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**If you have any questions about anything in this report, please contact us at:**

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