



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty

COVID-19

Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring Report



Issue 11 - February 2021



Parents Experiences



Feedback & Data from OPFS Services on Parents Experiences

The COVID-19 virus pandemic presents 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. Actions to limit the spread of the virus is putting enormous stress on single parents, having to deal with the realities of national and area-based restrictions. The consequences for families during this time has increased anxiety for many parents and children that we support. Adding to this, ongoing disruptions to school and nursery provision means that many single parents who struggle daily with the delicate balancing act of being able to earn and support their children to learn are placed under immense pressure, many thrown into increased poverty.

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%¹. A third (36%) of all children in poverty in Scotland live in a single parent family².

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

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



Parents Experiences

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.

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.

Introduction

Welcome to our eleventh COVID-19 impact report.

Single parents continue to suffer extreme hardship in February 2021 because of coronavirus lockdown restrictions. The two main themes from this month's findings are the pressures of home-schooling and the impact of domestic violence. After a year of massive economic turbulence and social upheaval, there is a clear sense from parent's feedback that they are looking forward to lockdown restrictions easing and children returning to school.

The February spotlight focusses on our Edinburgh services and the way in which its staff have used digital technology to continue the important work of OPFS.



1. Health and Wellbeing

Stress, Anxiety and Mental Health

- Families experience of the pandemic during the winter months has been very difficult. It has been characterised by extended isolation and the strain of home schooling. These events have severely challenged their resilience and wellbeing.
- Parents report that uncertainty about what the future holds is a constant worry.

I haven't been out of the house since December last year and I feel more and more anxious about catching the virus.

I have to walk to the shops with my two-year-old and take a taxi back with the shopping which makes me really anxious.

I am not coping with the restrictions it is affecting my mental health, I am worried about my children.





2. Your Benefits



Universal Credit (UC)

- Parents tell us that Universal Credit (UC) appeals, calculations and waiting times for first payments do not provide financial security and leaves them worried for their short- and long-term prospects.
- Parents are concerned about the transitions of moving from tax credits to UC, their children turning sixteen and the implications that these changes will have on their UC payments.

Other Benefits:

- If working hours are changed will this impact on UC?
- How do I access help with Universal Credit and Housing?





3. Your Money

Financial Concerns & Poverty

- Requests continue for help with paying for fuel costs
- Furlough schemes and unemployment are closely associated with a rise in poverty levels. This link was highlighted in the feedback from parents.

Recurring questions include:

- With Statutory Pay coming to an end, what help can I get?
- Higher Education and Post Graduate study - Can I get help from SAAS?
- Scottish Child Payment - what is the criteria for this and how do I apply?
- Personal Independence Payment - How to appeal a decision?
- Can I get help with childcare costs and help from the hardship fund at University?

“Where can I get help with energy grants, I am struggling.”





4. Support For You

Increased stresses on family relationships

- This month's data drew attention to the range of domestic abuse that individuals can experience from their ex-partner. This includes stalking, online abuse, coercive control, financial abuse, and physical harm. The outcome for victims and their loved ones is often experiencing fear, powerlessness, and insecurity.
- Families tell us that our services are vital in times of crisis, for example, supporting those families fleeing domestic violence, requiring help with housing issues and needing emotional support.

“Where can I get support, my ex-partner has just come out of jail and he is stalking me. What court orders can I apply for?”

- Parents report disharmony and tensions within the household because of home-schooling.





5. Separating / Being a single parent

Children - Sole Care responsibilities

- Parents continue to experience difficulties balancing childcare and working from home. The return to school cannot come quick enough for many families.
- Parents are very concerned that their children have fallen behind academically.
- Some parents acknowledge that they have not adhered to Government lockdown restrictions due to family need.
- Arguments over schoolwork are commonplace. Some parents can be left feeling powerless while helping their children when they themselves have limited literacy and numeracy skills.
- Family routine has been disrupted and this is more pronounced when there is more than one child given rise to competing demands.
- Parents with older children are raising concerns about their offspring's adherence to lockdown restrictions and the consequent increased risk of virus transmission.
- Some families have requested school placements due to mental health concerns - not all schools adopt the same policy, and this has proven problematic for some.

The first two weeks of home-schooling were an absolute nightmare.

I feel traumatized as I never thought I would be a single parent. Where do I start?

6. Your Children

Child contact & Child Maintenance

- Some parents report practical problems sharing childcare.
- Some parents continue to experience child contact issues and financial difficulties with regards to child maintenance.

“ Why would the Child Maintenance service be contacting my employer? ”

“ Child Maintenance - what options are available to me as I am newly separated? ”

“ A working parent I support has shared care of her son, so he is in the care of her ex-partner or a member of his own family while she is at work. She is very reluctant to use formal childcare and this has caused an issue as the child's father is not in agreement. She is concerned with the unnecessary travelling to and from the nursery and the amount of interaction of her son will have with others. ”



Spotlight: Edinburgh Services

This month we are spotlighting OPFS Edinburgh services and the impact of COVID-19 on current practice, new projects, parent relationships and use of digital technology.

- 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, cost of heating, and lighting
- Help with crisis applications for fuel, food, and essential items
- Hints and tips on managing your worries
- Ideas for activities you can do at home to keep you and your family occupied
- Up-to-date advice and referrals for access to local services & resources³



³ [OPFS Edinburgh Local Services. Available online at: https://opfs.org.uk/who-we-are/local-services/edinburgh/](https://opfs.org.uk/who-we-are/local-services/edinburgh/)



The Edinburgh Service Manager makes the following observations,

“There has been a lot of change over the past 18 months. Obviously, the pandemic has been the biggest driver of that, but we were also in the process of a few other things when COVID-19 hit including, our understanding of how much digital technology factored. This has been the biggest change.

We have worked well as a team. I never would have thought that working from home on this scale would work very well. I think it has also meant that staff who are often not working at the same time have communicated better using a range of digital technology, such as “Slack” (a digital team space where people get work done together), which has enabled staff to be more flexible in how they want to work and connect with colleagues.

From January 2020 we have been working with a funder called the “Good Things Foundation”. They originally funded us to do more work with parents around gaining digital skills that would help them in the workplace, as well as ‘embedding’ digital in how we work across the board. It became apparent very quickly that there were many single parent families who did not have computers, connections, or digital confidence at a time when it has never been more crucial. While we wanted to continue to help people get jobs, we also recognised that there were single parents who were not seeking work that needed this kind of help over the crisis. So, we broadened our approach a bit, and received support from a few different sources to get more computers and distribute them and help families get WI-FI in their homes.

Simultaneously, we also wanted to and were forced to engage with parents through increasingly digital means due to lockdowns and restrictions. Like everyone, we began to offer both group and one to one support online via Zoom and other platforms. I am proud of how quickly we did this in areas such as Employability and Digital skills courses, Mental Health and Wellbeing groups, one to one Counselling, Friday night quizzes, cooking sessions, parent, and child activities on Saturdays.

In some ways this has been an attempt to ‘patch up’ services that we cannot offer in person. However, in other areas, for example, counselling is another way to engage with parents. Single parents are short on time, and we have seen some services have better take up rates than they would have had when delivered face-to-face. So, I am sure this will factor in to how we work even once the pandemic is over.”



Digital Confidence, Connectivity and OPFS Website:

Edinburgh services quickly realised the importance of digital technology in communicating with colleagues and single parents. Pre-COVID-19, OPFS launched its new website. However, the pandemic led to a radical overhaul so that it was more user friendly for parents. Features such as, online chat, Lone parent helpline, Ask-A-Question, Single parent stories, became important tools for the Edinburgh Service to successfully engage with its client group. The website quickly became an important tool for OPFS service delivery, perhaps as important as direct contact via local project service locations. This is evident by the increase in website traffic. This has increased 300%. Consequently, because of this staff responses have increased to online engagement.

The Edinburgh Service manager notes that,

The dynamism in our team and commitment to prioritising digital confidence and connectivity through our Digi parent work has contributed to shifting the culture.

Edinburgh service personnel have adopted new approaches when working with parents. This includes...

- Facilitating all pre-existing group work across three services through digital meet up applications (Skype, Jitsi, Zoom)
- Developing the use of their Facebook page to be a family resource by setting up a schedule of four posts a day covering different themes as well as promoting work and resources being used by partners
- Internally using virtual meetings online to great effect in bringing the team together at a time when they could have been isolated.

The Edinburgh Service has successfully maintained connectivity with single parents, managers, and colleagues during the pandemic. It has by these actions responded effectively to this crisis and have improved outcomes for many families.





Observations

As we can see from this month's spotlight, the necessity of adopting digital technology, within OPFS, has proved very effective. It has enabled us to maximise the support offered to single parents within the current restrictions. Our Edinburgh service stands out as a noteworthy example of how to use the virtual platforms to advance the aims and objectives of our organisation. This has proved successful during the pandemic and will be a blueprint for going forward. However, the merits of using digital technology should be complementing rather than replacing face-to-face interaction. Perhaps a blended approach will be the best way forward in the future.





One Parent Families Scotland

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