



Thriving, Not Just Surviving

Research on Improving Employability Support for Single Parents and People with Caring Responsibilities in Scotland

Interim Findings: A Discussion Paper

Funded and supported by



March 2021

Working Together to Value and Invest in Unpaid Care in Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS), together with Oxfam Scotland, prioritise the promotion of decent work in tackling poverty. We also recognise the need to value unpaid care work as labour market participation is not an option for everyone. Both organisations have identified that unpaid care work, and those who provide it, is significantly undervalued in Scotland, resulting in poverty for too many people who look after someone. Analysis published by the two organisations in 2020 showed the estimated value of unpaid care work in Scotland is £36 billion per year.¹ Linked polling showed four in five people in Scotland believe unpaid care work is not valued highly enough, with strong support for measures to address this.

Ahead of the Scottish Parliamentary elections in May 2021, OPFS and Oxfam Scotland –with Scottish Care, the Scottish Women’s Budget Group and the seven National Carer Organisations in Scotland, including Carers Scotland – have called for the creation of a new National Outcome on valuing and investing in all forms of care, both unpaid and paid, in Scotland.² While a range of specific and actions to boost the incomes of those who provide care is also urgently needed, this new Outcome would be placed at the heart of Scotland’s National Performance Framework. It would not only drive policy and spending choices to better value care but help lock-in the lessons from COVID-19 and ensure the level of progress achieved can be transparently monitored.

A key area requiring significant progress is the ability of work to provide to reliable route out of poverty and critical to this is the removal of barriers for those with caring responsibilities to accessing decent work. An important consequence of the undervaluation of care is its effect on reducing the employment choices for those who undertake unpaid care work. This is compounded by a lack of sufficient and effective employability support for people juggling unpaid caring responsibilities with the need to secure paid work. These barriers disproportionately impact women, including single mothers, who provide the majority of unpaid care in Scotland.

Improving Employability Support for Single Parents and People with Caring Responsibilities in Scotland

To explore this issue further, OPFS - with Oxfam Scotland’s support - has undertaken a qualitative review of the effectiveness of interventions to support single parents and other people with caring responsibilities in Scotland into paid work. This briefing describes the findings and recommendations of a literature review, targeted interviews with expert academics and direct engagement with single mothers and people with caring responsibilities - experts by lived experience. It is hoped this learning can help inform improved employability support in Scotland, capitalising on devolved powers, to enhance support for everyone choosing to seek paid work in Scotland, but particularly for those who undertake unpaid care work. In doing so, it seeks to build on positive, if incremental, progress in Scotland to improve employability support.

Key Messages to Improve Employability Support

- This report calls for a new approach to employability for single parents and people with caring responsibilities, the majority of whom are women, that puts access to good-quality, sustainable and rewarding employment at the heart of its design and operations.
- Given the consistent undervaluation of unpaid care and women’s work more generally, an intersectional and gendered lens should inform Scotland’s employability framework. This

¹ Oxfam. 2020. Unpaid Care Work Worth £36bn in Scotland. Available online at: <https://oxfamapps.org/Scotland/2020/01/20/unpaid-care-worth-36bn/>

² Oxfam. 2021. We Must Invest in Care and the Carers. Available online at: <https://oxfamapps.org/Scotland/2021/01/25/we-must-invest-in-care-and-the-carers>

approach would support women who are single parents and carers into decent paid work and, crucially, to progress within it - thereby supporting them to increase their incomes.

- Fair Start Scotland (FSS), the Scottish Government's flagship employability programme, is described as offering "*individualised one-to-one support to unemployed people who face the greatest challenges to obtaining work*".³ It lists single parents as a priority group, however statistical research on the performance of the programme does not currently include disaggregated data on single parents who receive support - this should be remedied.
- While it is encouraging that Fair Start Scotland does not adopt an approach based on conditionality and benefit sanctions, it is largely a continuation of the preceding UK-wide model. Despite a number of strong improvements, there is evidence that some positive elements are not being implemented. Qualitative research has found a reluctance to invest in more intensive interventions due to the existing payment structures.⁴
- The Scottish Government should continue to use its powers to carve out a distinctive Scottish approach to employability, drawing on the effective and innovative approaches considered in this report. There are numerous models for effective employability support and our research suggests a set of evidence-based criteria to best meet the needs of single parents and carers.

Single Parent Families in Scotland: Context Analysis

While the project's findings have relevance for all those with caring responsibilities, given this research was led by OPFS, it has a particular focus on single parent families. In Scotland, 25% (144,000) of all families with dependent children are single parent families, with 133,000 (92%) of these headed by women.⁵ The average age of a single parent is 39 years old. Around eight out of ten single parents are aged between 25 and 50 years old, and just 1% are teenagers.⁶ The Poverty and Inequality Commission has highlighted that 37% of all children in Scotland living in poverty live within a single parent family, and 94% of single parents are women.⁷ Single parents are more likely to have a disability – around one in four single parent households have a disabled adult, compared with around a fifth of couple parent households and 16% have at least one child with a disability.⁸ The number of single parent households is projected to rise by almost a fifth (19%) by 2041.⁹

In the UK, the poverty rate single parent families is 48% compared to 26% in couple families with children.¹⁰ By 2021 single parents and their children will lose a fifth of their income due to welfare reform – an average of £5,250 a year. Without significant action, the predicted increase in the UK

³ Scottish Government. 2021. Scotland's Devolved Employment Services: Statistical Summary. Available online at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotland's-devolved-employment-services-statistical-summary-9/>

⁴ Scottish Government. 2019b. Fair Start Scotland Evaluation Report 2: Overview of year 1 – November 2019. Available online at: www.gov.scot/publications/fair-start-scotland-evaluation-report-2-overview-year-1-november-2019/

⁵ Office for National Statistics. 2021. Families by Family Type, Regions of England and the UK Constituent Countries. Available online at: [Families by family type, regions of England and UK constituent countries - Office for National Statistics](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/familiesandhouseholds/articles/familiesbyfamilytyperegionsofenglandandtheukconstituentcountries)

⁶ Gingerbread, 2018. One in Four: A Profile of Single Parents in the UK. Available online at: [One-in-four-a-profile-of-single-parents-in-the-UK.compressed.pdf \(gingerbread.org.uk\)](https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/resources/one-in-four-a-profile-of-single-parents-in-the-uk-compressed.pdf)

⁷ Poverty and Inequality Commission. 2018. Advice on the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018. Available online at: [Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-advice-Final-Version-23-February-2018.pdf \(povertyinequality.scot\)](https://www.povertyinequality.scot.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-advice-Final-Version-23-February-2018.pdf)

⁸ Gingerbread. 2018. One in four: a profile of single parents in the UK. Available online at: [One-in-four-a-profile-of-single-parents-in-the-UK.compressed.pdf \(gingerbread.org.uk\)](https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/resources/one-in-four-a-profile-of-single-parents-in-the-uk-compressed.pdf)

⁹ The National Records of Scotland. 2018. Scotland's Population the Registrar General's Annual Review of Demographic Trends. Available online at: [Scotland's Population - 2018 \(nrscotland.gov.uk\)](https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/scotland-s-population-2018)

¹⁰ Social Metrics Commission. 2020. Report on Poverty and Covid p49. Available online at: [The Social Metrics Commission - a new measure for poverty in the UKhttps://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/](https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/)

working age benefits, cuts to tax credits and universal credit, stagnant wages and sharp rises in the cost of some essential foods, public transport, domestic fuel, Council Tax and childcare have left families on the 'national living wage short of what they need for a basic, socially acceptable living standard.

COVID-19 – A Severe Impact on Single Parents and Children

For many families, the Covid-19 pandemic has meant their home has also become a workplace for the parent and a classroom for their children. This shift has had a severe impact on diverse families across Scotland, including their experiences of coping with and recovering from the impacts of the government's measures to reduce the spread of the virus.

Beyond this, many families, but especially single parent families, face the potential for financial problems stretching beyond the immediate pandemic period. The crisis in employment brought about by Covid-19 is experienced differently based on class, gender and ethnicity with these factors contributing to who performs 'key work' and who is able to work from home.¹⁶ For example, various think tanks suggest that the Covid-19 crisis will affect women adversely as they are 47% more likely to have lost their job.¹⁷

The pandemic therefore poses a unique challenge for single parents, particularly as they depend on one income and don't have the support of another adult in the home to share childcare and parenting responsibilities. It is clear that Government actions to limit the spread of the virus are putting enormous stress on single parents. The consequences for families during this time has increased anxiety for many of the parents and children supported by OPFS. 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 raise their children, are placed under immense pressure, with some thrown into poverty.

There is emerging evidence that single parent families have been among the groups most adversely affected by loss of income caused by the pandemic. The crisis risks increasing the likelihood of more single parents and their children experiencing negative social and economic impacts that are beyond their control, placing further additional pressures on those families. And the consequences are significant with poverty and isolation have a detrimental impact on parent's and children's wellbeing, causing stress, anxiety, and poor mental health.¹⁸

Analysis by IPPR shows that, coming into the Covid-19 crisis, single parent families in Scotland were more exposed to financial insecurity than other family types¹⁹ Meanwhile, research by the UK Women's Budget Group shows that the financial and economic impact of lockdowns has entrenched pre-pandemic inequalities. Over half (53%) of single mothers said they were struggling financially, compared to 35% of married mothers.²⁰

And there could be worse to come with the looming employment crisis, and potential for future peaks of the virus, posing a particular threat to single parent families, who do not have a second income to rely on, or another working-age person who might be able to go out to work. Once single

¹⁶ The Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2020. Covid-19 and Inequalities. Available online at: [Covid-19-and-inequalities-IFS.pdf](#)

¹⁷ Fawcett Society. 2020. The Coronavirus Crossroads: Equal Payday 2020 report. Available online at: [Coronavirus Crossroads: Equal Pay Day 2020 report | The Fawcett Society](#)

¹⁸ OPFS Policy & Research Briefing Papers. Available online at: [One Parent Families Scotland \(opfs.org.uk\)](#)

¹⁹ Institute for Public Policy Research. 2020. Weathering the Storm: Strengthening Financial Security in Scotland through the Ongoing Covid-19 Crisis. <https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-10/weathering-the-winter-storm-oct20.pdf>

²⁰ Women's Budget Group. 2021. Pushed to More Precarity: The Uneven Impact of Lockdown on Mothers and Lower Income Parents. Available online at: [Pushed to More Precarity: The uneven impact of lockdowns on mothers and lower income parents – Women's Budget Group \(wbg.org.uk\)](#)

parents are out of work, they often face additional barriers to getting back into work, particularly in the form of childcare arrangements and costs.

It is vital that policy makers take account of the different economic position of women and men and the specific challenges faced by women, particularly single mothers. This includes their higher levels of poverty, homelessness, the unequal load of unpaid care work and widespread violence against women. Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic, disabled, low-income women and single mothers will be particularly affected by a gender-insensitive response to this crisis as their economic position is more disadvantaged.²¹

Background and Rationale to the Research

One in six Scottish adults provides care for someone with a mental or physical illness, old age, or a physical or learning disability.²² Unpaid carers experience a 10-percentage point employment gap compared to the national average,²³ and suffer a heightened risk of poverty.²⁴ Almost a quarter (22.6%) of all households with children in Scotland are headed by a single parent.²⁵ While their employment rates have risen steadily over recent decades – from 43.8% in 1996 to almost 69% in late 2019 – they continue to lag behind the equivalent figures for cohabiting mothers and fathers: 77.6% and 93.8% respectively.²⁶ Prior to the pandemic, over a third (37%) of those providing more than 20 hours of care per week were living in poverty,²⁷ as were 43% of lone parent households.²⁸ This situation has deteriorated since the onset of the pandemic²⁹, reinforcing that there is no route to poverty elimination that does not tackle the structural labour market barriers faced by these groups.

The barriers faced by single parents and carers are well-documented. Despite this, seven in 10 unpaid carers (69%) in the UK reported receiving no financial or professional support, including 40% of those providing over 35 hours care per week.³⁰ Even with their numerical significance and heightened risks of poverty, single parents and carers have been described as largely “invisible” on employability programmes, with advisors and wider programme-design often unaware of their specific circumstances, needs and responsibilities.³¹ As a result, most mainstream interventions

²¹ Women’s Budget Group. 2020. Crises collide: women and Covid-19. Available online at: [Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19 - Womens Budget Group \(wbg.org.uk\)](https://www.womensbudgetgroup.org.uk/crises-collide-women-and-covid-19/)

²² Carers UK. 2020. Covid-19 pandemic: 392,000 become unpaid carers in Scotland in a matter of weeks. Available online at: <https://www.carersuk.org/news-and-campaigns/news/covid-19-pandemic-392-000-become-unpaid-carers-in-scotland-in-a-matter-of-weeks#:~:text=New%20figures%20released%20for%20Carers,the%20total%20to%201.1%20million>

²³ Aldridge., H and Hughes., C. 2016. Informal carers & poverty in the UK An analysis of the family resources survey New Policy Institute.

²⁴ Scottish Government, 2020 *Fair Work Action Plan*. <https://economicactionplan.mygov.scot/fair-work/unpaid-carers/>

²⁵ Gingerbread. 2019. Employment and skills. Accessed July 1, 2020. Available online at: <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/employment-and-skills/>

²⁶ Office for National Statistics, 2020a. Employment Rates of People by Parental Status. Available online at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/workingandworklesshouseholdstablepemploymentratesofpeoplebyparentalstatus/current>

²⁷ Aldridge., H and Hughes., C. 2016. Informal carers & poverty in the UK An analysis of the family resources survey New Policy Institute.

²⁸ DWP Stat-Xplore. 2020. Households on Universal Credit. Available online at: <https://stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/tableview/tableview.xhtml>.

²⁹ Institute for Public Policy Research. 2020. Weathering the Winter Storm Weathering the winter storm: Strengthening financial security in Scotland through the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. Available online at: [Weathering the winter storm \(ippr.org\)](https://www.ippr.org/research/2020/07/14/weathering-the-winter-storm)

³⁰ Scottish Government, 2020 *Fair Work Action Plan*. <https://economicactionplan.mygov.scot/fair-work/unpaid-carers/>

³¹ Gingerbread. 2013. Tailor-Made? Single Parents’ Experiences of Employment from the Job Centre Plus. Available online at: <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/tailor-made-single-parents-experiences-employment-support-jobcentre-plus-work-programme/>

fail to provide the intensive and tailored support that these groups need to tackle to their multiple and/or complex barriers.³²

Employability Policy Context: the UK and Scotland

Previous studies have typically placed employability interventions on a range from ‘work first’ to ‘human capital’ approaches. The former relies on negative (financial) incentives and prioritises immediate (re-)entry into employment; the latter invests in training and skills-acquisition.³³

‘Work first’ approaches have dominated in the UK in recent decades, with intensifications in the scope and severity of job-search conditionality. These are seen as cost-effective approaches, but are also associated with financial destitution, heightened stress and anxiety, and poor-quality, often unsustainable, employment outcomes.³⁴ Previous research has also found that they can worsen rather than alleviate tensions with caring responsibilities.³⁵ In general terms, this approach is seen to poorly serve those facing more complex or multiple barriers to employment.

In contrast, ‘human capital’ approaches are associated with improved and more sustainable outcomes and greater progression prospects, especially in labour markets with low demand and a huge supply of the labour.³⁶ However, both approaches demonstrate an individualist, competitive, rational conception of the labour market that may overlook external and structural barriers to employment.

The Scottish employability landscape is a complex patchwork of local, regional, and national initiatives, each with different target groups, funding streams and methods. Since 2017, employability became a fully devolved competency, meaning control moved to sit with the Scottish Parliament. This has offered welcome potential to integrate and streamline provision, and to dovetail its operations with wider Scottish Government frameworks, such as the Fair Work Agenda³⁷ to improve the quality of paid employment and the Scottish Child Poverty Delivery Plan³⁸ which seeks to realise Scotland’s legal child poverty targets.

Multi-agency Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) – often comprising the local authority, local health services, third sector organisations, and others – are run in individual local authority areas. Fair Start Scotland is the Scottish Government’s flagship national employability programme, for which single parents and those with certain other caring responsibilities are amongst the identified priority groups.³⁹

³² Gingerbread. 2013. Tailor-Made? Single Parents’ Experiences of Employment from the Job Centre Plus. Available online at: <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/tailor-made-single-parents-experiences-employment-support-jobcentre-plus-work-programme/>

³³ Jones, A. 2012. Welfare Refores and Labour Market Activation. *Local Economy* 27 (5):431-448.

³⁴ Hotz, V., Imbens, G and Klerman, J. 2006. Evaluating the Differential Effects of Alternative Welfare to Work Training Components: A Re-Analysis of the California GAIN. Available online at: https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/imbens/files/evaluating_the_differential_effects_of_alternative_welfare-to-work_training_components_a_re-analysis_of_the_california_gain_program.pdf

³⁵ Campbell, M., Thompson, H., Fenton, C and Gibson., M. 2016. Lone Parents, Health, Wellbeing and Welfare to Work: A Systemic Review of Qualitative Studies. *BMC Public Health* 16 (188).

³⁶ Sol, E. and Hoogtanders, Y. 2005. Steering by Contract in the Netherlands: New Approaches to Labour Market Integration. In *Contractualism in Employment Services*, edited by E Sol and W Westerveld, 139-166. The Hague: Kluwer.

³⁷ Fair Start Scotland. NK. Fair Work Agenda. Available online at: <https://www.statscotland.scot/fair-work-ajenda>

³⁸ Scottish Government. 2018. Every Child, Every Chance: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-2022. Available online at: [Every child, every chance: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultations-petitions/consultations/every-child-every-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-2022/)

³⁹ Scottish Government. 2020. Fair Start Scotland: Annual Report – Year. Available online at: [Fair Start Scotland: annual report - year 2 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultations-petitions/consultations/fair-start-scotland-annual-report-year-2-2020/)

'No One Left Behind', is the Scottish Government's strategy for placing people at the centre of the design and delivery of employability services.⁴⁰ It "promotes a strengthened partnership approach where the spheres of government work more collaboratively with third and private sector to identify local needs and make informed, evidence-based decisions, flexing these to meet emerging labour market demands."

The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan announced a new Parental Employability Support Fund. This is being delivered through local authorities to offer new and enhanced employability support across Scotland - 65% of the Parental Employment Support Fund investment is targeted to support parents who are employed on low incomes to tackle in work poverty and 35% supports parents not yet in work to address barriers and progress towards employment.⁴¹

Employability & Barriers

The majority of single parents are women and we know women's participation in the labour market contributes significantly to the Scottish economy.⁴² However, for many women a range of barriers exist which together can make it difficult for them to achieve their full potential in all sectors and at all levels in the labour market. Occupational segregation features as a key characteristic of modern labour markets with an associated tendency for the market to undervalue the jobs that women disproportionately do.⁴³ Tackling all forms of gender inequality and supporting women to access and participate in employment is vital for the economy, health, family life and the community.

The traditional view of an individual's employability describes three main elements, each with their own associated barriers⁴⁴:

- **Individual Factors:** skills, qualifications, health, literacy, confidence, and motivation.
- **Personal Circumstances:** caring roles, household circumstances, finance, debt, and social capital.
- **External Factors:** jobs market, transport, benefits, childcare, services, prejudice/stigma.

However, Oxfam's **Sustainable Livelihoods Approach** (SLA) goes beyond simple problem-oriented interventions to consider the holistic improvements that are within an individual or family's reach⁴⁵. It believes that in order to make ends meet, people draw on a range of different assets depending on which ones are available to them. External government policies often only focus on a single aspect of someone's life, such as their income or earnings. Other factors such as family and caring responsibilities, are not considered. The SLA Approach argues that policies which recognise the benefits of a "holistic" approach would be more effective in supporting people to make positive changes in their lives and to then sustain this over time.

⁴⁰ Scottish Government. 2020. No-One Left Behind: Delivery Plan. Available online at: [No One Left Behind: delivery plan - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/news/no-one-left-behind-delivery-plan/)

⁴¹ Scottish Government. 2020. Tackling Poverty. Available online at: <https://www.gov.scot/news/tackling-poverty-1/>

⁴² Engender. 2016. Unblocking the Pipeline: Gender and Employability in Scotland. Available online at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/unblocking-the-pipeline-gender-and-employability-in-scotland.pdf>

⁴³ Engender, NK. Gender Matters Roadmap: Towards Women's Equality in Scotland. Available online at: <https://gendermatters.engender.org.uk/content/employment/>

⁴⁴ McQuaid, R and Lindsay, C. 2005. The Concept of Employability. *Urban Studies* 42 (2): 197-219.

⁴⁵ Oxfam. 2020. The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach: Toolkit for Wales. Available online at: [OXFAM CYMRU KICKS OFF 2020 WITH BIG WIN AT WELSH GOVERNMENT – Oxfam Cymru \(oxfamapps.org\)](https://oxfamapps.org/oxfam-cymru-kicks-off-2020-with-big-win-at-welsh-government/)

The Research Methodology

This research used a combination of desk-based and qualitative research. We conducted a series of focus groups and one-to-one interviews with a diverse and representative sample of single parent carers, to hear about their experiences of employability programmes. This engagement helped to identify the report's 'evaluative criteria', against which we evaluated five previous employability interventions aimed at, or largely serving, single parents and/or carers. These previous interventions were identified in consultation with an advisory group of experts in employability and parents and carers on the grounds of their effectiveness and/or innovation.

Each of the employability programmes examined demonstrated, to a lesser or greater degree, innovative and effective elements of employability support for single parents and carers from which we might draw examples of good practice. Each case study drew on the relevant programme's evaluative outputs, complemented with qualitative interviews with expert academics with direct experience of these programmes. Effective practices common across these case studies were identified, highlighted, and used to outline a framework of the key ingredients for a successful employability programme for single parents and carers. The programmes examined included:

- Working for Families (2004-06).
- Marks & Start (2004-18).
- Making It Work (2013-17).
- Carers in Employment (2015-17).
- Health 4 Work (2016-19).

Identifying Principles for Effective Employability Programmes

In examining these programmes, we were not seeking to devise a detailed roadmap, but to identify guiding principles for employability programmes, and the questions and challenges these might entail. The principles identified by single parents were **dignity and inclusion; empowerment; personalisation; holistic support; and good jobs, not any job**. These five key principles and priorities, which were developed from our research and with the direct input of single parents and carers, offer a useful guide for informing the Scottish Government's employability programmes. We examine each principle below:

Principle 1: Dignity and Inclusion

No parent or carer should be forced to choose between destitution and the wellbeing of their child or cared-for person. Programmes should use proactive and positive incentives rather than damaging disciplinarian approaches. A number of respondents reported being treated with suspicion, maligned for perceived lack of effort, and adversely impacted by the more unsavoury elements of benefit discourse. All the parents and carers we spoke to were keen to work, but reported needing support to make this feasible and realistic.

Conditionality and the threat of financial sanctions for non-compliance are not only a source of stress and anxiety for participants, but also force them to accept unsuitable and unsustainable jobs. The constant threat of financial damage can prompt unrelenting anxiety in participants, severely hampering their efforts to enter or sustain employment. Previous research has found that directive or pressurising behaviour serves to exacerbate barriers to work.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Campbell, M., Thompson, H., Fenton, C and Gibson., M. 2016. Lone Parents, Health, Wellbeing and Welfare to Work: A Systemic Review of Qualitative Studies. *BMC Public Health* 16 (188).

“It actual stresses me out. They text me all the time saying, ‘check your journal, check your journal’. I’ve got four different advisors, that all mail me the same stuff [...] all these courses and stuff even though I’m working now.” – Single Parent Focus group participant

Principle 2: Empowerment

Asset-based approaches should work with the individual’s skills and aspirations through intensive investment in personal and professional support and development to ensure that parents and carers can thrive, not just survive.

Everybody that we spoke to had aspirations, for themselves and for their families, and many saw training, studying and work experience as routes to achieving these:

“I wanted to study to access better-paid jobs. I didn’t want to work in cleaning jobs all my life. I wanted more for myself and my son. And I loved my son watching me studying because to him that became a part of life, something to take example from. Now he takes that with him in his own life.” – Single Mother Focus group participant

Principle 3: Personalisation

Employability programmes should tailor their content and services to the unique combination of barriers facing each individual participant. Furthermore, nobody can recognise, report, or resolve these barriers better than service-users themselves.

Third sector organisations were seen by single parents and carers as much better-equipped to provide this personalised service. There was a perception among parents that third sector staff were there out of vocation, in contrast with larger employability providers, and that they had greater expertise and specialism. Our participants were generally understanding of the resource-constraints faced by mainstream services and therefore forgiving of the limitations of the support they received, but this nevertheless negatively influenced their opinion of them.

“It’s the wee groups like those offered by OPFS that actually help you out with the information. At the Jobcentre, they’re like robots just reading these scripts off a screen. My advisor had no idea, and that made me nervous.” – Single Parent Focus group participant

“When you talk about Jobcentre – obviously it depends on the advisor – but the scale is big and might not address the needs of single parents in the way smaller organisations like OPFS do.” – Single Parent Focus group participant

Principle 4: Holistic Support

Programmes should address every facet of an individual’s employability, including structural and external barriers. Single parents, in particular, need complementary services beyond individual employability factors.

“You need support from all angles, a package – not only employment – but benefits because they might change when you move into employment. People have no clue about Universal Credit, and nothing is explained to them.” – Single Parent Focus group participant

Principle 5: Good jobs, not any job

A job should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to a flourishing and sustainable livelihood. Any employment outcome should promise dignity, progression, and an adequate wage. For many single parents, progression prospects within paid employment are a key consideration. If employability interventions are to truly reflect empowerment, single parents and carers should not be precluded from having professional aspirations because of their circumstances.

“I want to have a job where I can progress still. I’ve got 20 years of employment ahead of me. I don’t want to be stuck doing the same tasks.” – Single Parent Focus group participant

“I had always just been looking for part-time work, due to having the children, but now that’s my youngest in Primary 7, I just started looking for full-time work.”
– Single Parent Focus group participant

There is a strong degree of overlap between the five principles above and those outlined in the Scottish Government’s *Creating a Fairer Scotland* framework.⁴⁷ We welcome these principles and values, and hope that the findings and recommendations of this report contribute to translating them into practice more effectively for single parents and carers.

Having identified the above principles as our ‘evaluative criteria’, we examined each previous employability programme identified in detail, with these findings outlined in the full report. Our findings were then used to formulate certain key learnings and to develop recommendations for future programme-design. Preliminary recommendations were presented to further focus groups of service-users, as well as the project’s advisory group of experts, and subsequently refined according to their feedback.

Key Recommendations for Employability in Scotland

The research findings aim to contribute to the discussions and planning for the replacement of Fair Start Scotland in 2023.⁴⁸ This will be important for three reasons. Firstly, the devolved offer has been in place for a number of years now and it is unclear of its success in supporting single parents and others with caring responsibilities along the employability pathway. Secondly, the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, and with a new Scottish Government elected, means there is an opportunity to inject new energy and ideas into this debate. Thirdly, the Covid-19 pandemic has made this reports’ findings and recommendations all the more urgent amid the significant upheaval to the labour market that will continue to hit single parents and carers disproportionately.

The devolution of employability powers has seen a more dignified and personalised approach begin to emerge in Scotland, with the welcome eradication of conditionality and improved flexibilities. However, on the basis of our findings on best practice, we have identified certain gaps and areas for improvement in the Scottish offer. The Scottish Government should:

1. Embed our key principles within the Scottish Employability Framework

The five key principles and priorities for employability programmes, developed from our research and with the direct input of service-users, should be used to guide Scottish Government employability programmes. These are:

- **Dignity, Inclusion and Outreach:** No parent or carer should be forced to choose between destitution and the wellbeing of their child or cared-for person. Programmes should use proactive and positive incentives rather than damaging punitive approaches.
- **Empowerment:** Asset-based approaches should work with the individual’s skills and aspirations through intensive investment in personal and professional support and development to ensure that parents and carers can thrive, not just survive.
- **Personalisation:** Employability programmes should tailor their content and services to the combination of barriers unique to each individual. Furthermore, service-users themselves are best placed to recognise, report, or resolve these barriers.

⁴⁸ Fair Start Scotland. NK. Fair Work Agenda. Available online at: <https://www.statscotland.scot/fair-work-agenda>

- **Holistic Support:** Programmes should address every facet of an individual's employability, including structural and external barriers. An individual's employability is only as strong as its weakest link.
- **Good paid work, not any job;** A job should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to a flourishing and sustainable livelihood. Any employment outcome should promise dignity, progression, and a fair wage.

2. Enrich and improve measures of success

- **Single parents' and carers' outcomes must be transparent and fully disaggregated:** Outcomes and results must be transparently disaggregated to enable the assessment of the programme's adequacy for single parents, carers, and women beyond a headline level. Single parents and carers are not homogenous groups and should not be treated as such within evaluative outputs.
- **Employment outcomes should be assessed on their quality, pay and progression prospects:** Employability programmes should put good-quality, sustainable and rewarding employment at the heart of its design and operations as part of efforts to ensure people secure a sustainable livelihood.
- **Fair Start Scotland should adopt a more longitudinal perspective and embrace 'distance travelled' indicators:** Outcomes payments and evaluative outputs remain overly focused on employment outcomes. It remains unclear what incentives there are for providers to support those furthest from the labour market to move closer to employment.

3. Simplify and integrate the Scottish employability landscape

- **Fair Start Scotland should be better integrated with local provision:** The staggered devolution of employability powers has left a complex patchwork of local and national initiatives that are difficult to navigate, align poorly with one another or, at times, explicitly compete against each other. Initiatives which are based on true partnership and integrated funding streams would make sure that programmes work in the interests of their participants rather than those delivering them.

4. Strengthen partnership-working within Fair Start Scotland

- **Fair Start Scotland should strengthen and widen its practices around partnership-formation and partnership-working:** Partnerships of experts – in their fields and in their communities – are central to delivering the holistic, specialist, intensive support needed by single parents and carers. Consortia of relevant partners can better deliver high-quality wraparound support than a supply-chain model. Dedicated single parent and carer specialist organisations bring indispensable expertise, credibility, and trust to programmes, but are often excluded by large-scale tendering processes.
- **To this end, funding processes should prioritise and incentivise partnership-working and high-quality services, rather than efficiencies:** Competitive tendering can foster adversarial rather than collaborative relationships between providers, with participants suffering as a result. Instead, we would like to see a funding and governance model that incentivises collaboration and constructive deliberation instead of a 'supply chain' mentality.

5. Boost awareness and engagement of employability programmes

- **Fair Start Scotland should work proactively at community-level to build awareness, trust, and participation:** Awareness of mainstream employability programmes remains low among eligible individuals. FSS should surpass statutory bodies and mechanisms for recruitment and accept that specialist third sector organisations and community-level venues have a vital role to play in the delivery of effective employability programmes as trusted and reputable sources of information, but they require active inclusion and real incentives to do so.

6. Invest in single parents and carers' assets and skills through intensive interventions and intensive upskilling

- **Funding models should be reformed to ensure adequate investment in participants. Payment by results should be avoided.**

Previous research has found efficiency-oriented tendering and payment by results to be associated with increasingly homogenous services and under-investment in those facing significant or multiple barriers. Flexible, generous, and up-front funding streams, co-managed by partners are central to providing the tailored, responsive and intensive interventions necessary.

- **Fair Start Scotland should pursue a fully-fledged 'human capital' approach to employability.**

The UK's historic under-investment in skills-provision is a direct cause of the current prevalence of low-skilled, low-paid work, and the 'low pay, no pay' cycle that characterises many individuals' employment experience. Human capital approaches that invest in upskilling and training demonstrate higher success, especially for those facing multiple barriers to employment and during economic downturns. They are also associated with more sustainable outcomes, higher employment conditions and better progression-prospects. The use of training, work experience and voluntary work should be expanded, and opportunities to pursue higher and further education should be backed up with effective financial support.

7. Co-produce and tailor employability support with participants

- **Fair Start Scotland should offer real opportunities for co-production:** FSS has demonstrated a sincere commitment to the principles of co-production. However, opportunities for the effective participation of single parents and carers is limited. Co-production should be core to the design and delivery of employability programmes, with participants actively involved in shaping the support they receive, not merely offered a 'menu' of options.
- **Fair Start Scotland should build on the flexibilities granted to participants:** Exercising control over the pace, timing and end-goal of their own participation is essential for single parents and carers to balance their work focused and personal responsibilities. Arbitrary timelines are incompatible with this, especially amid ongoing uncertainty and turbulence of ongoing home-schooling, lockdown, and labour market disruption.

8. Provide holistic support to help a deliver a sustainable livelihood

- **Fair Start Scotland should employ a sustainable livelihoods approach to ensure that all facets of an individual's employability are being resolved:** Following the success of Oxfam's 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' with DWP staff in Wales,⁴⁹ we believe that Fair Start Scotland should institutionalise this holistic approach to personalised support. This model relies on relationship-building and a comprehensive understanding of participants' circumstances to ensure tailored, wraparound support.
- **Scottish employability should support financial resilience through both educational and practical routes:** Better-off calculations, as well as budgeting and welfare rights advice, are highly effective interventions that help to smooth entry into employment and ensure sustainable outcomes. In addition to these established financial inclusion measures, practical financial (or, at least, 'in-kind') support should help to tackle the costs associated with entering employment. The implicit assumption that parents and carers have savings

⁴⁹ Scullion, L., Wilding, M., Jones, K and Martin, P. 2017. Evaluation of DWP & Oxfam Livelihoods Training Project Final Report. Available online at: <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620306/er-livelihoods-project-evaluation-dwp-oxfam-031117-en.pdf;jsessionid=E3A62D30407608F2107116CB26F421C2?sequence=7>

or a secondary wage to fall back on defies the reality. The Scottish Government should therefore create new payments or extend eligibility to the Job Start Payment.

- **To provide truly holistic services, childcare and transport will require much greater attention:** These policy fields are inextricably linked to employability. In the absence of accessible, affordable childcare and transport, sustained entry into employment remains unlikely. The roll-out of funded early learning and childcare should be a stepping-stone towards greater provision and there should be ongoing, sustainable and substantial funding investment by the Scottish Government in providing out of school care and holiday provision.

9. Embed employability interventions and practices within local labour markets

- **Employer-facing activities should have a central role within Fair Start Scotland:** Job-crafting and brokerage, with ongoing revision, can help to tailor employment terms and patterns to suit caring responsibilities. Effective employer-facing activities should be central to the model with the required investment in the skills and relationship building needed.
- **Fair Start Scotland should pursue 'demand-led' training in consultation with participants and local employers to maximise additionality:** Training opportunities should be offered in response to individuals' aspirations and local labour market gaps and opportunities. This requires early and ongoing partnerships with local employers. At present, such opportunities often appear to be an afterthought or under-utilised.
- **The Scottish employability landscape would benefit from a 'middle ground' that better maps onto local labour markets:** Research has previously noted that arbitrary administrative boundaries map poorly onto local labour markets. At the other end of the scale, FSS' regions appear unwieldy, especially for those who lack mobility or transport. A system that integrates national, regional, and local initiatives would result in greater additionality.

10. Continue to instil the principles of fairness in the Scottish labour market

- **Fair Start Scotland should maintain and expand its selective approach to job-search activities:** 'Work first' approaches to employability may have fed the proliferation of low-paid work. Under the Scottish offer, service-users used should be encouraged to apply selectively to vacancies that meet their financial, personal, and family requirements. However, this approach will likely be compromised if payment by results remains in place.
- **A revitalised approach to employability should be complemented with activities and incentives that encourage employers to improve their own standards:** Long-term aspirational activities through the Fair Work Agenda, as well as more immediate financial mechanisms of procurement, conditional business support and financial incentives, are important routes to facilitate fair employment practices in workplaces across Scotland. Female-dominated sectors such as hospitality and retail, and publicly funded sectors like childcare and social care are prime candidates for such efforts.

11. The Employability Framework should be complemented by investment in employment standards and more direct job-creation and industrial strategies

- **Effective and high-quality employability programmes are an essential complement to bold and ambitious demand-side interventions:** As supply-side interventions, the success of employability programmes inevitably hinges on the availability of real, good-quality employment opportunities, in the absence of such jobs, supply-side interventions risk undermining wages and employment conditions. The Scottish Government should use its procurement processes and conditional business support to drive up employment standards, in addition to more direct job-creation and industrial strategies. These must not neglect women-dominated sectors.

Conclusion

Employability has clear links and interactions with several Scottish Government agendas, priorities, and policies – including efforts to tackle child poverty. However, it is evident that there is no route to eliminating child poverty, or to address gender inequalities, that does not include tackling single parents’ and carers’ employment-related barriers. It is equally clear that, to succeed, the Scottish Government’s Fair Work agenda should be fully and effectively aligned to an enhanced employability programme, including concerted and rigorous employer-facing activities.

Single parents’ potential to benefit from educational opportunities is compromised by lack of accurate information, bureaucratic problems, and inconsistent funding provision. The rollout of funded early learning and childcare and investment in out of school and holiday care will play a vital role in tackling the childcare-related barriers faced by parents and carers. However, it is not always clear how or whether policymakers have joined-up these various policy fields and agendas.

In light of the upcoming Scottish Parliament election, this research aims to stimulate debate on this complex policy field, to explore new and innovative approaches to design and delivery, and to support policymakers in progressing a holistic view of employability and its complex interactions across policy-boundaries. With renewed debate, we believe there is a promising opportunity to build on Fair Start Scotland’s strengths, to achieve a distinctive, effective, and fair Scottish approach to employability for single parents and people with other forms of caring responsibilities in Scotland.

We are very encouraged by the report from the Scottish Social Renewal Advisory Board set up by Scottish Ministers to make proposals that can renew Scotland once we start to emerge from the pandemic. It calls for the development of targeted employability schemes for groups most likely to be excluded from the labour market. The report argues that *“even before the pandemic, too many people in Scotland – particularly lone parents (who are overwhelmingly women), BAME people, disabled people, and people with mental health issues – found themselves locked out of the labour market. In developing employability schemes, it is critical that those groups already facing exclusion from the labour market are not overlooked, and that targeted interventions – which, for example, provide flexibility to ensure all can engage in them – are aimed at them to ensure their exclusion is not further entrenched.”*⁵⁰

The rise of precarious work and ‘new social risks’ has prompted greater reflection and engagement from academics, think tanks and charities, including Oxfam Scotland’s research and analysis on the undervaluation of unpaid care work,⁵¹ and their ‘sustainable livelihoods approach’ – which aims to support individuals into sustainable and rewarding employment.⁵² This intersectional, gendered lens has informed much of our research given the consistent undervaluation of unpaid care and women’s work more generally. It is hoped that this report will sit alongside existing literature and research to identify best practice within the fields of employment and employability.

This report was commissioned as an enquiry into ‘what works’ in employability for single parents and those with caring responsibilities. However, in so doing we have also identified gaps in the current Scottish provision of employability support and have advanced recommendations. While this report is framed with particular regard to single parents and carers, the recommendations we make would have huge benefits for all of those facing multiple barriers to employment. Our broad vision for employability programmes moves beyond the ‘work first’ versus ‘human capital’ debate to take full account of the quality and sustainability of employment outcomes. A failure to move

⁵⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/not-now-social-renewal-advisory-board-report-january-2021/>

⁵¹ Oxfam. 2020. Unpaid care work worth £36bn in Scotland. Available online at: <https://oxfamapps.org/scotland/2020/01/20/unpaid-care-worth-36bn/>

⁵² Oxfam, 2020. The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach: Toolkit for Wales. Available online at: <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/297233/sustainable-livelihoods-approach-toolkit-wales-010713-en.pdf?sequence=8>

beyond this narrow dichotomy continues a conception of labour market participation that fails to engage with the complex personal circumstances and wider, structural barriers that many single parents and carers face.

The findings of this research highlight the importance of investing in participants' assets, interests, and aspirations. This will facilitate good-quality, sustainable employment outcomes, and offer sustained, effective in-work support, and ongoing educational opportunities. Concerted local employer-facing activities would help to shape employment outcomes and terms to ensure high standards and sustainable transitions. Single parents and carers do not want to merely survive but should be supported to thrive.

Previous and forthcoming research has made similar calls from a theoretical and academic perspective.⁵³ It is hoped that our empirical findings will complement this research and help to clarify how these aims can be achieved in practice in Scotland.

About the Research

The research was carried out by OPFS Programme Researcher Nicholas Heslop.

The full report, '**Improving Employability Support for Single Parents and People with Caring Responsibilities in Scotland**' will be published by OPFS in April 2021 with funding and support from Oxfam Scotland. It will be available as a free PDF at www.opfs.org.uk

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) is the leading charity working with single parent families in Scotland. It provides expert information, advice, and support for one parent families, along with training activities, employability programmes and flexible childcare. OPFS campaigns with parents to make their voices heard to change the systems, policies and attitudes that disadvantage single parent families. Our vision is of a Scotland in which single parents and their children are valued and treated equally and fairly. Our mission is to work with and for single parent families, providing support services that enable them to achieve their potential and help create lasting solutions to the poverty and barriers they face.

One Parent Families Scotland
2 York Place, Edinburgh EH1 3EP
Tel: 0131 556 3899
www.opfs.org.uk

⁵³ McQuaid, R, and Fuertes, V. 2014. Sustainable Integration of Long-term Unemployed: From Work First to Career First. Munich; Fuertes, et al., Forthcoming