



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty

COVID-19

Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring Report



Issue 12 - April 2021



Parents Experiences



Feedback & Data from OPFS Services on Parents Experiences

The impact of the COVID-19 virus pandemic continues to be 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 have put 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 have been placed under immense pressure, many thrown into increased poverty

Most 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 family.²

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 ongoing impact of the crisis we publish a bi-monthly '**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:

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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 from parent's experiences across OPFS channels:

- **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

During the months of March/April 2021, single parents' key concerns did not waver from previous months. Financial, work related, and mental health concerns remained at the forefront of people's lived experiences. There is, however, an expectation that the next few months will allow the return to work for many, including those on low incomes, as well as the opening of businesses which will be a kick start to the economy. Freedom of movement will also lead to a greater sense of wellbeing. While these positive actions arising from the lifting of lockdown restrictions may alleviate some of these concerns, the underlying challenges for single parent families remain.



1. Health and Wellbeing

Stress, Anxiety and Mental Health

- Parents are experiencing severe anxiety, isolation, depression, and some are seeking counselling.

No contact with ex-partner who has also thrown me out. I have no-where to live and sofa surfing. I want to see my son. Can you help me?

My son has been diagnosed with autism. I have been waiting on counselling for nearly a year. Is there any other help I can get as I am feeling depressed. We have no contact with the father of my son.

2. Your benefits

Universal Credit (UC)

- UC calculations continues to be a key issue for many people. Some parents also worry about their change of circumstances and how this will impact on subsequent payments due to fluctuating incomes.

I do not get Universal Credit because of my salary but can you do calculations for me reducing work and increasing childcare to see what difference this makes?





3. Your Money

Financial Concerns & Poverty

- At times, parents do not have enough money to pay for food and household utilities. Too many parents are telling us that they require prompt and increased financial support from the Scottish Welfare Fund and Scottish Child Payment.
- Some parents continue to struggle with day to day bills and have problems paying their rent.
- For those who are students, help with college fees and benefits, help with childcare costs during term - time and proving that they are indeed a single parent for benefit entitlement, can be problematic.

Recurring questions include:

- Can I get help to pay housing costs for private let/housing association/ council property?
- Carers Allowance Supplement - who can get it and how do you make a claim?
- How can I apply for energy grants?
- Where can I get the Scottish Child Payment?
- Spring Hardship Payment - How much is it and what date will it be paid?
- How do I appeal a decision for Personal Independence Payment?
- What help can I get from SAAS if I apply for a Degree Course in Nursing?
- Carers Allowance Supplement - who can get it and how do you make a claim?
- The Scottish Welfare Fund - how do I apply for this and how many applications can I make a year?



3. Your Money

I have a Scottish Welfare Fund application in for moving to a new house with two children under five and it is just not enough. Is there other help I can get?

I am returning to work after maternity leave and want to settle my child in nursery but have no money for the upfront costs.

I have no carpets in my house, the Scottish Welfare Fund refused me, and I have mental health issues. What can I do as my home is freezing?

How many Scottish Welfare Payments can you get in a year? I have been refused recently and I am desperate. Are there Grants that I can apply for?





4. Support For You

Increased stresses on family relationships

- The next steps following separation from a partner are challenging for single parents.
- Domestic violence continues to feature regularly:

“ I need to find work around my child’s school hours, she has already lost her father and moved to a new city and schools due to her father’s violence and is terrified that she is going to lose mummy too if I am not able to drop her and collect her from school...”

“ I am very worried about one of my teenagers when he returns from staying with his dad, he is becoming increasingly aggressive. I am scared as my ex-partner was very controlling and used to stalk me. This is affecting my mental health. What can I do?”

“ I am worried about the future with my children.”

Recurring question

- Where can I get abuse counselling for my child?





5. Separating / Being a single parent

Children - Sole Care responsibilities

- Some parents report problems with child contact and seek advice on where to get help with family mediation.
- Problems accessing childcare is universal, as is needing help to pay for childcare costs.
- Maternity issues include a drop in income while on Statutory Sick Pay
- Family law - a key question is, who has the right to parental rights and responsibilities?

I had free Early Learning place for my two-year-old, but I am starting work full time - will I lose this place?

What is the eligibility for a two-year-old getting a nursery place. I am struggling at the moment. How do I apply for this?

My son and I are at loggerheads over homework and now he has gone to live with his Dad. What can I do about it and what are my rights?

My teenage son and I nearly came to blows because of the pressure of living in a small house with very little money and home-schooling during lockdown. I have no other family support. Where can I get support?

My ex-partner has a new girlfriend and has moved in with her after one week. I don't feel confident letting my young son go stay there at the weekend. What are my Rights?

I am separated from my ex-partner but not married. Will I get any of his savings or property?

6. Work / Education and Training

Employment Rights

- Some parents are starting to require information and advice on their employment rights, job contract, flexible working arrangements, and questions about possible redundancy.
- It is becoming more apparent that parents are feeling increasing pressure from Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Work Coaches to look for employment. For example, work coaches are phoning parents fortnightly and asking about how many hours they have looked for work, if they have signed up for any courses and what jobs they have applied for. They are anxious that their personal circumstances are not being considered.

Case Study 1

An OPFS Employability and Digital Skills Worker reported that a parent, who has a young primary aged child, has had to leave another city due to a violent relationship. She is now living in City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) temporary accommodation. The individual has both physical and mental health issues and lacks writing skills. Despite this, the job coach continues to call and ask how her job searches are going.

The worker feels that DWP fail to appreciate the need for a more tailored response to individual circumstances when supporting parents into work or engaging with them with regards to their job search progress. Rather, they employ a harsh and pressurised form of scrutiny which only serves to reinforce embedded inequalities and continues to produce a cycle of negative mental health.



6. Work / Education and Training

Case Study 2

The second case involves a parent with a pre-teenager. Her child is undergoing assessments for ADHD and Autism while displaying frequent violent behaviour and threatening self-harm/suicidal thoughts. The parent has worked all her adult life until losing her job last summer due to Covid-19. She now must endure fortnightly calls about her job situation and searches.

"I dread the fortnightly calls from the DWP and often think of not answering. I have said to the work coach, I have worked all my life and will happily take a job if you can help me find one which fits around my child's needs. The work coach just told me to keep looking for jobs".

Parents across the country are trying to do the best for their families but at every turn they are being penalised because they are not able to fully focus their time on finding employment. As an organisation which advocates on behalf of single parents, we would hope and strongly urge the DWP to adopt a more flexible and empathetic approach to people's personal circumstances during and after the pandemic crisis.

Recurring question

- Where can I get help with my CV and how can I get Skills Development Scotland to help me?





7. Your children

Child contact & Child Maintenance

- Parents continue to report problems with receiving Child Maintenance
- Some parents also experiencing stress of having shared care responsibilities for their children.

I have evidence that my ex-partner is not declaring his correct earnings to HMRC and the Child Maintenance Service. How can the Child Maintenance Service not sort this?

I am not getting enough child maintenance for both my children and still waiting for this to be sorted. I am working but struggling financially.

My ex-partner and I were communicating well but now this has changed. What can I do to get it back on track? What are Parental Rights and Responsibilities, what do they mean and how much child maintenance should I be getting for my child?

Recurring questions include:

- Child maintenance: what happens when my child turns 16?





Spotlight: The Scottish Welfare Fund

The Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) supports individuals and families on low incomes living in Scotland. People can apply for,

- Crisis Grants
- Self-Isolation Support Grants
- Community Care Grants.

Claimants may only be eligible to access this support if they are aged 16 or older, on a low income and are in receipt of certain benefits.

A view from our Welfare Rights Advisor in OPFS Glasgow:

Q. What kinds of difficulties have parents faced accessing SWF appeals/hardship payments during the pandemic? How have you supported parents?

A. Parents are often unsure how to access the SWF and can be discouraged from applying given the amount of paperwork which is involved. The very process can cause anxiety and stress. We try to work through any concerns and worries parents have via telephone calls to help give peace of mind and reassurances. The application process is mainly completed online.

Another reason why parents may feel reticent towards applying for help is down to the stigma attached to it, due to payments and assistance only given because of low incomes.

Q. How did the application process change during the pandemic?

A. The application process has become tighter during COVID-19. It has become harder for people to get an award payment. This may be due to the timing of claims as the advisors may judge a claim as not being eligible if the individual claiming has received their UC or Child Benefit at the end of the month. Therefore, the advisors then infer that that person is not in desperate financial straits to require assistance with the crisis payments for example.

Normally people can apply up to three times to the service. However, since the pandemic the number of appeals has allowed unlimited applications which has been good.



Case Study 1

Parent A is a single parent with two children. Her only income is UC and Child Benefit. She has severe mental health problems and is awaiting a decision on a Personal Independence Payment application.

She has been living in a furnished temporary flat after being in a Woman's Aid Refuge.

This parent has now been given a permanent house with a housing association which is unfurnished.

She only has a few items of furniture and has no white goods apart from a cooker.

A SWF application was made for essential goods for the family. She was awarded a fridge, washing machine, tumble dryer, carpets, pots and pans. We then applied to Aberlour Children's Charity for a double bed for the parent and two single beds and bedding for her two children. We also made a referral to Home Start and combined with money received from Aberlour. We arranged a starter pack delivery which has all non-essential items i.e. cutlery dishes, towels bedding etc. These starter packs cost £60.00.

If we had to rely solely on SWF this parent would have been unable to move into her new home. SWF will only supply a list of goods that they take as being essential but if, as in this case, the parent has very little basic everyday items, there would need to be application to charitable funds.

If claims are successful to the SWF, families have the security and reassurance that they will be supported financially.

Case Study 2

Parent B is a single parent who lives with her son aged six. She lives in an unfurnished private let. Due to a court order which deducts £40 per week from her wage, she is struggling to afford her essential outgoings for herself and her son. She did not expect to have the first payment taken from her wages and was left with nothing to cover her until she received her next wage. She applied to the SWF but was refused as she had no change of circumstances and no reduction in her entitlement to benefit.

The parent was very stressed, and her anxiety was such that she had to go to her



G.P. for medication.

OPFS were able to access emergency funds from a Glasgow City Council grant which provided her with £50 to cover her direct debit for gas and electricity and also provided £50 of vouchers to cover her food costs. Her fridge and freezer were both not working which meant that she had higher food costs. Our partnership working with another third sector organisation arranged for these items to be replaced. We are also supporting her to budget her income to take account of the reduced amount of money she will have each month.

The client said that she did not know how she would have managed without OPFS intervention and the emergency payment “was a godsend”.

Case Study 3

Parent C has two children aged five and seven. She lives in a flat rented from her local housing association. When her daughter turned five years old, she had to move to UC from Income Support. As UC is paid monthly and has an assessment period, the parent would be without a UC payment for five weeks. She was advised by OPFS on how to claim an Advance Payment that she would pay back over 12 months from her ongoing payment.

The parent was extremely worried that this would reduce the income she had going forward as she was barely covering her outgoings as it was.

OPFS assisted her to apply to the SWF for a Crisis Payment which was awarded. We were also able to provide a small emergency grant to help her cover her outgoings until she received her first payment of UC. The result of this intervention was that she was able to request a much smaller advance payment and therefore reduced the ongoing repayment amount which gave her more ongoing income.

The parent was also referred to our Employability service who will assist her to move into employment when she is ready to do so and to build her confidence to become ready for work.



OPFS's partnership work with Glasgow City Council has involved staff utilizing the SWF surplus stocks of household appliances and furniture. Although this has only happened in the last three months, it reflects an example of good practice between the Third Sector and the SWF. Glasgow's Lead Practitioner explains this in more detail:

Every child should be able to have a home-cooked meal, a warm bed, clean clothing, and the chance to learn and play in their own home. But too many of the UK's poorest children miss out on these essentials.

Working in partnership with Glasgow City Council and City Building, single parents engaging with our Glasgow Service, who needed household appliances and furniture, were supported to access this citywide resource through our OPFS Glasgow Service.

Brand new items were delivered and connected, with old, broken items taken away. By reducing the financial burden on families who would otherwise struggle to afford vital household items like a bed for their child, or a cooker for the kitchen, this service has helped to alleviate family stress.

This vital support enabled vulnerable families to save on their family income, alleviating circumstances of debt, reducing energy bills and fuel costs which helped to promote family well-being, as the everyday challenges and stresses of caring for children, without the use of essential household items, were addressed. During the period of Jan – March 2021: 103 vulnerable families were supported to access these invaluable resources.

By reducing these obstacles to the wellbeing and development of children growing up in poverty, this short-term service gives children a chance of a better start in life.





Observations

Our collated feedback from OPFS services covers the period, of March to April. The data draws our attention to the fact that many single parents who are reliant on UC and other benefits often need additional financial support. Specific Government agencies such as the DWP ought to be concerned with facilitating employment and income for parents which fits around their needs. However, the findings of this report suggest that the interventions of the DWP work coaches at times can be an unwelcome and stressful experience, more focused on meeting targets than managing individual personal circumstances.

On the other hand, we note the positive outcomes for people in receipt of assistance from the SWF. The example from our Glasgow Services Lead Practitioner demonstrates the importance of effective partnership working and managing such funds for the benefit of those in need. OPFS will continue to advocate on behalf of single parent families with all our partners including, Local Authorities and the DWP to alleviate material deprivation and promote positive mental health and wellbeing.



One Parent Families Scotland

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