

# Freeing low-income single parents from in-work poverty's grip

As a society, we do not want to see children growing up in poverty, with severely restricted opportunities to reach their potential. In Scotland, we have rightly committed to significantly reducing child poverty, but we know that some families face greater constraints than others. Many single-parent families are locked in poverty by a combination of multiple barriers and injustices in the labour market.

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## Recommendations:

- High-quality affordable and flexible childcare, which considers the need for support for older children, and is better equipped to provide care for children with additional needs.
- Investment in single parents/carer specific employability programmes delivered with employers which combines flexibility, high-quality paid work and in-work training.
- Back-to-work specialist mental health support for single parents and carers.
- Scottish Government fully funded qualifications pathway focused on single parents accessing high-quality jobs (particularly vocational skills or courses focused on growing sectors such as technology).
- Addition of 'single-parent supporter' to the Scottish Business Pledge.
- Encouragement of more part-time roles across the labour market to enable access to higher-paid roles for single parents.
- Programme of activity and training for employers to be able to better respond to, value and understand single parents' lived experiences.
- Flexible working as standard across the public sector, and encouraged in the private sector.
- Advance support fund for single parents entering the labour market to assist with advance payment for childcare and other requirements.
- Specialist advisors and support to create a fit-for-purpose social security system.
- Policy and delivery coherence across employability, childcare, social security and more to ensure single parents' needs are being met across the policy portfolio.

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## Executive Summary

Of the 230,000 children in poverty in Scotland, 90,000 live in lone-parent households. Working with this group is vital if we are to reach the Scottish Child Poverty targets by 2030, and to prevent more children growing up in hardship. Unlocking families from poverty means improving the availability and affordability of housing, bolstering social security, and ensuring work can become a real route out of poverty for people who are able to work. This report deals with the work aspect of this and explores the experiences of low- or no-income single parents entering, staying in, and progressing in, the Scottish labour market by speaking with the parents themselves in a series of focus groups and interviews.

The focus groups and interviews identified several areas where single parents are being left behind or overlooked. A consistent experience was a lack affordable and wrap-around childcare which also meets the needs of children under the age of three and disabled children. For single parents to ever have equal access to the labour market and break the cycle of poverty, a transformation is required in Scotland's childcare provision. Single parents expressed the stigma and hostility they faced by employers who did not understand or empathise with their role as the only carer for their children. Many participants had experienced discrimination when they asked for flexibility in their working hours or required leave due to an emergency (such as ill health) related to their child or children. Many single parents had to either leave their workplaces, or felt they were pushed out, because their employment was not compatible with their needs as single parents.

Participants stated that employers often overlooked their skills related to being a single parent; timekeeping, budget management and multi-tasking. As a consequence, single parents felt they were stigmatised for their time out of the labour market developing these skills which are not recognised or appreciated by employers. Finally, single parents expressed their lack of confidence and the impact on their mental wellbeing as a consequence of both being out of work and locked into poverty through inadequate state support, or locked into low-paid work where employers were inflexible or actively hostile.

Desk-based research found that current labour market programmes to help women returning to work get into the apprenticeship pipeline are not accessible to, or fit for purpose for, single parents. These programmes need to be reconsidered to be made more inclusive and specialist; single-parent focused interventions need to be funded and delivered locally across Scotland. A summary of this research can be found in the appendix.

Single parents expressed their frustration at having to repeat their experiences of inequality, particularly in relation to inadequate and inaccessible childcare provision. Some single parents had participated in consultative events before and felt they were either not being listened to or were being ignored, and that it is long overdue that instead of being asked to share their experiences, the focus should be on radically improving them.

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Many of these recommendations are not new, they provide further evidence for recommendations which have been called for over many years now (such as flexible working and wrap-around childcare) by One Parent Families Scotland, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Engender, the Child Poverty Action Group Scotland and more. However, this report expresses the urgent need for change and rapid delivery of these recommendations to tackle the poverty experienced by single parents and for Scotland to meet its targets to end child poverty. Most importantly, it does so through the words and co-production of single parents directly.

## Introduction

COVID-19 has exacerbated the injustices already felt by low-income single parents. The sectors where many single parents (predominantly women) are employed - such as retail, care and cleaning – have been hit by job losses, along with a decrease in availability of new roles (Public Health Scotland, 2020). The pandemic emphasises the need for investment in single-parent focused support.

Single parents are often trapped into poverty by a combination of factors; the escalating cost of childcare, increasing costs of living (particularly housing), a lack of quality flexible and part-time job roles, and a social security system which is not fit for purpose for their lives. A combination (and often all) of these factors makes moving out of poverty close to impossible for single-parent households. In particular, in-work poverty is a reality of many single-parents' lives. With low levels of pay, precarious contracts (uncertain numbers of hours per week) and reductions in benefits, working is not necessarily a route out of poverty.

The Scottish Government has at its disposal multiple policy levers which could break the cycle of poverty for single parents, provided the political will and level of sustained investment exists. To date, multiple efforts have been funded to support unemployed and under-employed people in Scotland into appropriate work, both as national initiatives and local funded (local authority or third sector governed) programmes. These have varied in their level of success (as found in the 2018 report; No One Left Behind: Review of Employability Services, in which it was found that Employability Fund Programmes had the highest level of engagement within the participant cohort). Overall, there is broad agreement that further and more sustainable funding is required along with a person-centred approach. However, despite multiple and diverse interventions, low-income single parents continue to be excluded in most programme delivery (see further analysis in appendix), as mainstreamed programmes have not been designed to meet single parents' needs, rendering them inaccessible. Specialist programmes are rare and largely short-lived and/or delivered directly by under-funded third sector partners.

The May 2021 Scottish Parliament elections took place during a pandemic which ensured that the NHS, social care and economic recovery were at the forefront of party manifestos. However, their understanding of, and response to, single parents made for disappointing reading. All main parties during this election, committed to increasing the weekly child payment to £20 and ensuring a speedy roll out of the

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increase to 1,140 hours of childcare. Some parties had gone further to commit to 50 hours per week childcare, wrap-around childcare during summer holidays, and increased access to childcare for all two-year-old children. All parties seemed committed to the rigidity of an hours-based structure rather than the transformational approach childcare needs, and single parents highlighted, during this research project. Whilst there was an acceptance of the need for affordability and flexibility, the solutions to provide these were lacking. Critically, plans for the economic recovery from the pandemic focus on sustainable jobs and access to training, and no party has committed to any specialist programme or interventions focused on single parents. Indeed, many of the interventions focused on the traditional young-person model (without any specific mention of caring responsibilities that group may have).

Only one party specifically stated that their skill development plans would be delivered in a way to meet the needs of those with caring responsibilities (with no other details), all other commitments were generic and not reflective of the realistic needs of single parents. The manifestos reflected the lack of lived experience informing policy development in Scotland and illustrate the need for a holistic approach to economic recovery which sees the importance of childcare, supporting single parents, and anti-poverty measures synonymous to a successful economy.

The Labour Market Strategy for Scotland of 2016 currently leads the direction of employment support and access activities. There is a depth of lived experience and equalities-focused work in the development of Social Security Scotland, the Tackling Child Poverty Strategy and the No One Left Behind Strategy. However, a rapid review of labour market measures (in the appendix) shows the majority of activity and investment remains targeted at the easiest people to reach, rather than people who find it hardest to get into work and who experience multiple and compounding inequalities.

There remains a higher prioritisation of young people's entry into the labour market (Blake Stevenson, 2018). Given consistently high levels of unemployment in the 16-24 age group, this is warranted, however further disaggregated data is required to analyse whether this is meeting the needs of those who require it most from within this group; for instance those who are single parents, those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, women, disabled young people, and those who fall into more than one of these categories. From the employability programmes and related strategies above, the majority focus on entry into employment, with a very small number of nationally funded programmes targeting in-work progression. Given that the majority of low-income single parents are experiencing in-work poverty, many would benefit from a shift in focus to provide equal investment to tackle in-work career progression and access to higher pay, employment security and better conditions. Fundamentally, a systemic issue that is causing in-work poverty must be addressed; the under-valuing of, and low pay within, sectors where single parents (the majority of whom are women) are disproportionately more likely to work, for example, care, hospitality, retail, and cleaning.

'Mainstreamed' employability projects which are funded by the Scottish Government, and most often delivered by the third or public sector, are not well adapted (or well funded) to enable them to deliver for low-income single parents (this review was

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unable to identify any specific single-parent employability programmes that were not linked to delivery by One Parent Families Scotland, Gingerbread or another single-parent focused organisation/group). An opportunity to reach an important group and effectively tackle child poverty is being missed, as mainstream activities could make necessary changes to their delivery to meet the needs of this important group. For example, widening the places participant outreach is delivered, providing better access to childcare support, covering travel costs, working in partnership with local employers and promoting high-quality, part-time and flexible work which would meet the needs of single parents and unlock access to more opportunities for them. The more this is embedded into mainstream practice alongside specialist programmes such as Parental Employability Fund Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021), the more likely it is to benefit the widest range of individuals. Ideally, this should be delivered alongside a specialised, Scotland-wide, person-centred and inclusive programme focused on single parents from low-income backgrounds. There is evidence (particularly with the low number represented in data available of single parents utilising current employability programmes) that the needs of single parents could be met with a specific fund and project as part of the Parental Employment Support Fund, similar to that of the Disabled Parents Support Fund.

Critically, disaggregated, high-quality data is required to enable us to evaluate the extent to which employability programmes are working for low-income single parents. Currently, at best, we have basic overall numbers for single parents' participation (though often this too is not available), however we do not have access to intersecting data to tell us if they are from low-income backgrounds, their race or their disability.

Whilst the principles of both No One Left Behind and Social Security Scotland (Social Security Scotland, 2019) are laudable, and set a very different tone in Scotland for employability delivery, further investment and effort is needed to both include more single parents' voices in design and development, but also to continue this path of dignity and justice, by supporting low-income single parents into sustainable, valued and well-paid work. As evaluations to date mirror the findings from decades of Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) delivery; employment is short-term, is often low paid and on precarious contracts (Newton et al, 2012) for people who are most severely restrained from accessing opportunities and financial security.

This report analyses research from focus groups and interviews with single parents to assess what high quality and responsive interventions are needed across the labour market and beyond to loosen poverty's grip on them. The appendix includes a rapid review of the Scottish labour market support initiatives currently available to better understand whether or not they deliver for low-income single parents.

Without proper investment in urgent action to enable single parents to access high-quality, flexible, sustainable and well-paid work, single parents will remain locked in poverty. Scotland will not only be letting them down, but the Scottish Government will likely fail to meet its own public targets on tackling child poverty.

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## Nine priority areas to support lone parents in the labour market

While speaking to parents about their experiences in work and seeking work, several key themes emerged. These were often barriers that they faced or challenges they repeatedly had to deal with. Here we highlight the themes and the recommendations that would address these issues.

### 1. Confidence and self-esteem

*“When I lost my job, that’s when it started, inside all the time, just lost all my confidence.”*

All single parents who took part in this research stated emphatically the loss of confidence that has occurred as a consequence of their current situations. Whilst many mentioned this was due to not being in work for a long period of time, the reasons for loss of confidence were multiple and emphasised the problem with an assumed one-dimensional view of single parents and the ‘deficit model’ approach used in employability programmes. This approach will be discussed in more detail later in this report (see appendix), however it is important to unpack here, as the loss of confidence is caused by how employers and employment agencies deal with people being single parents, rather than being caused simply by becoming single parents. Many participants explained that they had been stripped of their confidence by the restrictions and injustices of poor and stigmatising labour market practices. Losing their jobs as a consequence of their parenting needs diminished their self-esteem and instilled fear around returning to work.

Multiple single parents stated that working with One Parent Families Scotland and other third sector or local interventions boosted their confidence.

Their explanation was that unlike generic employability programmes or Job Centre (DWP) interventions, the appreciation and empathy towards their circumstances created a safe space to grow and learn, and to prepare themselves for returning to or remaining in the labour market.

Participants explained that their lack of confidence also comes from the feeling that “jobs had moved on” and “employers were looking for skills we don’t have”. This points to the need for interventions to build up not simply the ‘essential skills’ that are commonly attached to these types of programmes (for example, confidence building or knowing how to write a CV), but also to develop confidence in understanding a moving labour market, particularly in relation to the use of new technology across all sectors.

### 2. Mental health and wellbeing

Many single parents expressed the toll on their mental health of being out of work alongside their caring responsibilities and being locked in poverty. Many had

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diagnosed mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders, which have been exacerbated by the impact of losing their jobs, having problems at work or being unable to find appropriate work. This struggle was also emphasised in the way in which employers responded to their needs or presumptions made about their capacity to work. In particular, participants stated the need for employers (and employment support agencies) to have a better and more empathetic understanding of mental health in relation to living in poverty and single parenthood.

“I have an interview tomorrow, and my anxiety is through the roof, I feel overloaded, I used to do this all the time, I feel like I can’t go back.”

“I am constantly worried. Worried about my son, worried I will lose my job if I need to go. I am constantly anxious at work.”

The overlapping and compounding inequalities faced by single parents need to be taken into account when creating employment support programmes. Particularly, the impact of women’s inequality, gender-based violence, and pre-existing mental health conditions:

“My daughter had died a few years earlier and I had been in an abusive relationship which ended just after the birth of my son. Obviously, this had a huge effect on my mental health and this is what caused the anxiety. I was and still am overprotective of my son, I can see why this is but couldn’t stop my anxiety. I went to the GP because my manager [...] kept telling me I need medication - which I didn’t find helpful.”

“I am waiting on support through occupational therapy as they can help me from getting from a place where I have had psychotherapy for anxiety and depression and trauma-based therapy, in the hope they give me skills and confidence as well as any strategies and prevent a relapse. I know there are agencies to help people with mental health issues, to help support people get into work, and once in work, but have not worked with them yet.”

Many single parents expressed the anxiety around transitions in life whether moving into work after a significant break, losing work or changing roles. Support around these transitions to enable single parents to successfully remain in work is likely to have a positive impact on both single-parent communities and the labour market itself.

Recommendation on confidence building and mental health support:

- **Back to work specialist mental health support**

All employment support programmes which engage single parents should include free access to mental health support and access to specialists who can support participants with any mental health concerns whether these are pre-existing, or occur after entering a return-to-work programme, which have an impact on the ability to seek or stay in work.

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### 3. Employer behaviour and workplace culture

The majority of single parents stated that employers simply did not understand the reality of living as a single parent on a low income. They stated that there was a stigma associated with needing to work flexibly and be available for their children. They explained that on many occasions they had experienced clear discrimination based on assumptions about their homelife. Furthermore, they stated that employers did not appreciate the difficulties and restrictions associated with single parenthood and assumed that every single parent has a wide network of support (such as family members) to provide free or last-minute childcare.

As one single parent explained:

“They don’t understand, they will say, ‘well I’ve got kids and I work’ but what they don’t realise is they might have support, they might have family that can help, I don’t have that.”

From all participants only six expressed that their current employer was supportive, with a further two talking positively about a former employer. In all of these cases the emphasis was on the compassion and flexibility of the employer. Many single parents explained that, as well as being able to stay in work, their loyalty to their employer and their enthusiasm for their work increased as a consequence of this empathy and compassion.

One single parent explained their previous employer’s support:

“They offered us flexible shifts, they called them ‘parent/mum shifts’ which were 10-2, that was perfect, it was really understanding, I have never found that since.”

Others expressed that when starting a new job or being given training they felt they had support and understanding, however once induction periods were over, this support ended and they were left feeling “adrift”, with the presumption that they did not require any further support or flexibility once they were fully employed workers:

“I was supported by an advisor through my trial period but once I had successfully completed the trial and became an employee, I lost that support. I did not find the company family-friendly and my line manager was not very approachable. I did not feel at all supported in the workplace and had no support at home either.”

Single parents, across the board in this research, stated that without more flexibility from employers, flexible working patterns and better understanding of single parents’ needs, access to the labour market is essentially unobtainable. Where single parents had positive experiences of the labour market to share, they were all related to the line management and culture within the employment they had held or currently hold. Supportive cultures, line managers who communicate well, advance notice of shifts (appreciating the difficulties of organising childcare) and setting fair expectations, were all mentioned as practice of a ‘good employer’. However, the reality of this practice being rare or a matter of luck was discussed repeatedly:

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“I can’t complain, my new boss cares, he understands and gets what being a single parent needs, but my old job was terrible, it’s just luck. My last job you would get abuse for asking for time off to look after your child.”

Worryingly, participants expressed a “fear” over losing their jobs or suffering consequences (such as reduced hours) due to their childcare needs. For example, many single parents explained that they worried about how they would be judged for requesting last minute time off if their child was unwell or if their childcare had fallen through:

“I have seen what it’s like, they tell you they are flexible but they mean you need to be flexible for them. But it should go both ways. You worry when you ask about flexibility or time off for your kids, you know they will just replace you.”

“I had to go through a disciplinary because I had to leave work to take my daughter to the hospital and be off for a few days even though I explained.”

“Having flexible working would help as I constantly think about taking too much time off - I keep thinking about my son - thinking please don’t be sick.”

In addition to the general feelings of being judged and not feeling supported, single parents of disabled children or those with additional support needs stated that they feel a “double discrimination”. Three single parents stated that they either did not feel able to share their child’s needs with their employer or felt discriminated against when they did share their child’s needs and asked for additional flexibility.

Recommendation on employer behaviour and workplace culture:

- **Addition of ‘single-parent supporter’ to the Scottish Business Pledge.**  
The Scottish Business Pledge encourages employers in Scotland to sign up to a ‘values led’ pledge which includes tackling the gender pay gap, paying the living wage, paying contractors promptly and tackling the use of zero hour contracts. In addition to this, the Scottish Business Pledge should include a commitment to flexible working and a ‘single parent friendly’ provision which would promote culture change efforts in favour of single parents across the Scottish labour market.

#### 4. Respecting skills

Single parents expressed that they felt their skills were not valued by employers which added to feelings of worthlessness, a lack of confidence and anxiety around returning to work. single parents discussed how the skills they had gained through their caring responsibilities (for example, time management) were not given the status they felt they deserved, given how critical these are to the workplace. The majority of

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experiences from the focus groups indicated that employers remain fixated on previous and relevant work experience, however for many single parents their work experience may not be as relevant due to the significant length of time they have been out of the labour market. Instead, they are looking for the skills they are using day-in day-out as parents to be valued.

As single parents said:

“When you become a single parent you are the bank, the nurse, the cook, I am great at budgeting ... but workplaces don't take into consideration them skills.”

“You know you can do it [the job] nae bother, but if you haven't done it for years before, they don't give you the chance, if I had the job I could show I could smash it.”

“We need employers to see the experience at home, being a mum as something that matters, not just in a job with pay.”

Whilst employers often include these ‘soft or essential skills’ in job descriptions, and often have them as part of the essential criteria intended to be met by candidates, it is clear that single parents felt these were not given equal status to work experience related criteria such as ‘at least five-years experience in a similar role’. This creates specific challenges and exclusion from the job market for single parents. However, this has been acknowledged in research across recruitment, where there is a clear inequality within what essential criteria are truly valued.

Recommendations on improving employer behaviour, workplace culture and respecting skills:

- **Programme of activity and training for employers to be able to better respond to, value and understand single parents' lived experiences.**

Single parents made it very clear that stigma, hostility, inflexibility and a lack of understanding or respect for their skills by employers, were harmful to their chances of staying in work and experiencing a good working environment. However, there were clear examples of good practice by employers, which relied largely on the single parents' relationship with their line manager; illustrating that behaviour and attitude-change efforts could make a real difference here. As employment is reserved to the UK Government and appreciating a limitation on what can be pursued, a programme of development and influencing across the labour market should be launched. This work should focus on developing good practice in working practices (in particular, focus on tackling bias against single parents and under-appreciation of their skills during the recruitment process) and accountability in ensuring these practices are delivered.

## 5. Accessing employability programmes or initiatives

Employability and employment support programmes continue to disproportionately engage a traditional 'young person': 16-21, living with parents and without caring responsibilities. As outlined in the appendix at the end of this report, labour market support programmes, such as those delivered by Skills Development Scotland, are not responding to the needs of single parents and are therefore found to be inaccessible by many of them. Whilst many of these programmes are delivered as being 'open to all' their design and the data on uptake illustrates that despite the idea of inclusivity the delivery continues to be exclusionary for some.

Single-parents in focus groups explained that programmes delivered by third sector partners were more likely to meet their needs, as these are informed by the lived experience of diverse single parents.

Single parents stated that many programmes were not designed with single parents in mind, and particularly did not understand the complex barriers that may prevent them taking part in the labour market:

“Lots of these programmes need you to have good attendance but then don't think about what you do if your child is sick.”

“My big fear in being involved in these things is the discrimination you feel being a single parent.”

“I attended a few group sessions that I didn't find particularly useful and was given a placement... I was supported by an advisor through my trial period but once I had successfully completed the trial and became an employee I lost that support.”

Single parents discussed specific programmes which focused on return-to-work support such as those with Scottish Power (Scottish Power 2021) and Marks and Spencer (Princes Trust 2020). In these cases, programmes were designed from the very start with an appreciation of single parents' or carers' responsibilities and provided access to paid work as well as training opportunities. These types of programmes were spoken of positively, however, the focus groups acknowledged that these programmes are not very common and many have been short-lived.

### Recommendations on accessing employment programmes or initiatives

- **Investment in single-parent/carer-specific return-to-work programmes delivered with employers which combine flexibility, high-quality paid work and in-work training.**

This review found that whilst there are multiple programmes to provide back-to-work support, little to no specialist support for single parents was identified by participants. Furthermore, the majority of the programmes focus on young people (16-21) and assume they have no caring responsibilities. To support more people into the labour market and remove injustices that hold people

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back, avenues need to be created to enable access to programmes for all. It is recommended that a programme similar to that of the women-returners initiative should be invested in. This programme should focus on responding to the needs of low-income single parents, developing skills and working with employers to deliver flexible working environments. In particular, this programme should focus on supporting single parents into high-quality and secure work. This should be available across all local authorities and come with sustainable funding, matching at least 50% of Private Equity Funding (PEFS) funding across three years.

- **Employability programmes need to be co-produced with single parents and deliver to their needs.**

Employability programmes and access to work programmes currently do not meet the needs of single parents, either through inflexible time commitments, assuming a linear pathway back to work, or being incompatible with caring responsibilities. Programmes should be developed **with** single parents as standard practice and must work in line with childcare availability. These programmes should focus on skills development opportunities, access to high-quality paid work and be delivered through a flexible and/or part-time schedule.

## **6. Restricted opportunities**

Single parents are 19% more likely to be locked into low-paid and under-valued sectors such as social care, cleaning and hospitality work (Wilson, 2013), these are also sectors with disproportionate numbers of women working within them and sectors more likely to use exploitative zero hours contracts. These types of contracts were discussed in two out of the four focus groups, with an emphasis on the impact these types of contracts have on a single parent's ability to budget for their household and how it impacts their Universal Credit. It also has consequences on single parent's ability to source childcare support, particularly as zero hours contracts do not provide stability in terms of working patterns and can often change at very late notice.

*“Sometimes I can get told that morning that I need to come into work, or maybe the next day. I don't have a mum I can just send my kids to or family that can help, these contracts don't work for me but it's all that's available.”*

Participants explained that their job opportunities were limited by their needs as single parents. Their geographical need to be near their children's nursery or school, their financial need to not spend significant money on commuting and to find roles that were more accepting of the potentially long periods of time they may have spent out of work. Consequently, they felt that they were unable to have far reaching aspirations for their careers, as one single parent explained:

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“You pay the price for flexibility, you take the job you can get and fits your kid’s needs, not the job you want or the career you want to reach, and most of the time, it’s low pay.”

“There’s a lot of jobs I was applying for cause it’s all I knew, it was minimum wage, it would do, really it was just satisfying the job centre, it wasn’t about me or what I want to build up.”

During the pandemic we have also witnessed the reality of higher-paid roles being more likely to have access to flexible working and home working. Although this has been a reality long before COVID-19, the inequality between sectors has been exacerbated. Pre COVID-19, higher-paid roles (above £60,000 per annum) have seen a three-fold increase in the number of roles being advertised as fully flexible since 2016. Single parents expressed that despite having aspirations to have different careers and take on challenging roles, their aspirations were not met by the labour market itself. With a lack of flexibility, a lack of access to training and development and a lack of childcare-friendly roles being the primary cited reasons.

## Recommendations on tackling restrictions on opportunities

- **Flexible working as standard across the public sector, and better encouraged in the private sector.**

Whilst appreciating limitations due to the reserved nature of employment law, Scottish Government should take steps for both the public and private sector to deliver ‘flexible working as standard’. Whilst there is currently the right to ask for flexible working (but still be denied), this would instead provide single parents and those with caring responsibilities a right to flexibility (within reason and whilst able to meet the needs of the employer). Allowing a single parent to change their hours through a flexible working arrangement for example can be a highly efficient way of supporting working parents.

- **Encouragement of more part-time roles across the labour market to enable access to higher-paid roles for single parents.**

Single parents talked about their experience of being locked into under-valued and low-paid work, as a consequence both of needing flexibility and having gaps in their CVs. In order to tackle poverty and in-work poverty experienced by single parents, more employers across more sectors need to change their working cultures to recruit for more part-time or job-share roles which still have opportunities for progression and status in line with any full-time employment. Employers need to consider more routes for flexibility to allow more single parents to take part in fulfilling work that meets their aspirations.

## 7. Progression and Training

Single parents expressed the lack of progression or promotion opportunities in the work they had or are doing. Largely, they explained that they were held back by the type of work (low-paid and zero hours contracts) that was available to them, and that these were not necessarily the jobs they would envisage doing long-term. Secondly, single parents stated that being promoted usually came hand in hand with increasing hours and responsibilities, which many felt was a step too far alongside being fully responsible for all caring at home. As one single parent expressed:

“I don’t see myself here for long and I don’t think there really is anywhere else for me to go in it, I think I would need to go back to education to be a manager which I just can’t.”

“I want to progress, not stay in the same place. Getting training would help.”

Training opportunities, although not necessarily linked to progression, were spoken of very highly by many single parents. Jobs where they were given paid training as part of their induction. They felt this added value to their CVs and increased their enthusiasm for their new role.

“With the job I got now I got given three months training whilst I worked, that really helped, that gave me pay and skills, and the confidence. I could progress with that because of the training they gave me.”

Recommendation on access to progress, promotion and training:

- **Scottish Government fully funded qualifications pathway focused on single parents accessing high-quality jobs (particularly vocational skills or courses focused on growing sectors such as technology).**

As explained later in the rapid review (appendix), there is very limited access to training and skills development beyond ‘soft skills’ which provides access to future jobs. The majority of Skills Development Scotland delivery is not meeting the needs of single parents and the focus on full-time college courses has driven single parents out of skills development opportunities. Many single parents across the focus groups and interviews expressed their wishes to learn new skills and enter new roles or sectors, however they were unable to afford access to classes (such as coding classes) or free classes were not relevant or effective for their needs. A relevant skills pathway should be created, ideally either through the college system or a dedicated programme through Skills Development Scotland, which focuses on providing recognised labour market relevant qualifications for sustainable jobs of the future. These pathways should be delivered in flexible ways to meet the needs of single parents and be partnered with childcare support. This skills pathway should be fully funded in

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line with the model of paid tuition fees for Scottish students, and should allow single parents to access a specialist Student Awards Agency Scotland bursary to prevent them losing income as a consequence of choosing to study and potentially having their Universal Credit reduced.

## 8. Childcare needs

Childcare was the central issue in every focus group and interview and was intrinsically linked to what jobs are available to single parents and when. First and foremost was the escalating cost of childcare; for many single parents there was little value in pursuing a paid role where all of their income would be spent on childcare costs. As one single parent explained:

“To put my children into after-school care it was looking at about £600 a month... I don’t know how parents do it, single parents can’t do it, that’s a big barrier.”

A second issue with childcare was availability. Single parents expressed that they could only access childcare if local childcare providers had places available for their children, this is very much dependent on local amenities and investment in support:

“Depends on what is available in your area, I got offered a place for my kid, but I didn’t have a job, so had to give up that space, when I found a job, there was no childcare space, so I’m stuck.”

The third issue is wrap-around childcare. Many single parents expressed that the problem with after-school care largely only being available for all children until Primary 7. This assumes that children over the age of 11 or 12 years do not need care support. As one single parent said:

“Loads in east end Glasgow don’t take children after age 12, so what do we do when we are away at work? I can’t come back at three and he [son] can’t sit at home alone.”

The final issue was inflexibility. Free childcare continues to work under a rigid hours-based approach which assumes that parents and carers can work either a morning or an afternoon, for most single parents finding work which fits around a rigid hours-based childcare provision is all but impossible. Furthermore, most childcare is only available until 6pm, which again assumes a traditional 9am - 5pm working pattern, for those parents who are using private childcare many are also dealing with additional charging if they arrive after 6pm, an additional cost which they may not have the finances to deal with.

“Childcare that covers the times you are going to be working or training. It’s no use if nursery finishes at 3pm and your job finishes at 4pm. Making this easier for parents as I wouldn’t have anyone else to collect him.”

## Recommendation on childcare needs:

- **High-quality affordable and flexible childcare which considers the need for support for older children and is better equipped to provide care for children with additional needs.**

Childcare was the most important issue raised by single parents who participated in this review. There is clear need for investment in childcare that responds to the realities of single-parents' lives, allowing them to access the labour market and free them from poverty's grip, currently caused by system design flaws. Current free childcare provision for children under the age of three is insufficient. A very small number of two-year-olds are eligible to access free childcare, however this needs to be widened (for all one- and two-year-olds) if single parents are to have a chance to pursue an income. Single parents expressed a need for childcare which was 'wrap-around' (available outside current normal school or nursery hours), was available during school holidays and could be accessed at the weekend. They also stated the need for the hours-based system to change to a more flexible approach rather than the rigidity of regular allocated times and days which may not work with their employment. Finally, the rigidity around age in accessing childcare (starting, for some, from two years old) makes the labour market inaccessible for up to two years or more for many single parents.

**However, when developing this recommendation single parents and One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) staff stressed their frustration at how often they report the need for a transformation in childcare as their primary concern, without seeing any action. Over a number of years flexibility and affordability of childcare has been expressed as an urgent need yet they have not been listened to, and the level of change needed has not been delivered.**

## 9. Social security and Universal Credit

Multiple single parents in both interviews and focus groups stated the intimidating social security system which they found difficult to understand and often found themselves lost in paperwork that they had made mistakes with, further delaying access to financial support. They stated the feelings of fear caused by accessing the labour market yet being penalised for their success through losing Universal Credit support. These experiences were also echoed by OPFS staff who explained that a significant amount of time is required to support low-income single parents through the welfare system and the problems with the rigidity of the criteria excluded many of those who needed different types of support. Single parents said:

*"All the form work, you feel under pressure, if you don't know the process, you are lost."*

*"There is a fear when it comes to Universal Credit, you don't know how it works, you don't know how it will be if you get a job, and there's nobody there to talk to."*

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“When I lost my job, I had never used the benefit system, I didn’t know how it worked, and while I tried to work it out, I had no money, nothing.”

Many single parents felt they were ‘stuck in a loop’ where they could not pursue better work as they would lose Universal Credit support, but wanted to end their reliance on the benefits system. They expressed the need for a more empathetic transition period which allowed for Universal Credit to remain whilst better job opportunities and pay were pursued, rather than financial support abruptly ending before employment income being fully received.

Recommendation on social security and universal credit:

- **Advance support fund for single parents entering the labour market.**  
Single parents who have found work and require private childcare often have to pay a month in advance to secure childcare support. However most do not have savings and this can cost substantial amounts. Many low-income single parents also find themselves having to invest in preparation to work; whether that is costs for transport such as a railcard or bus pass and/or investing in work clothes/uniforms; all of this assumes that they have savings they can make use of. As such, the Scottish Government should consider a ‘childcare, transport or preparation support payment’ for people who need advance funds, which would allow single parents to access childcare, uniforms or transport without it acting as a barrier to return to the labour market.
- **Specialist advisors and support to create a fit-for-purpose social security system.**  
Despite some social security measures being devolved to the Scottish Parliament, the majority of benefits including Universal Credit remain reserved. However, Scotland can and should lead in creating a less hostile welfare system by providing more accessible routes to financial support. For example, the reintroduction of specialist advisors across Scotland (as still currently exist in Dundee) who can support low-income single parents access the benefits they are entitled to easily and clearly. These specialist advisors should also work in partnership with third sector providers (such as OPFS) to ensure support is accessed by those who need it and referrals to relevant single-parent groups and programmes can be accessed.

In line with the OPFS campaign to tackle the inequality and discrimination within the welfare system against younger parents, access to benefits should be based on need rather than arbitrary age categorisations.

Further recommendation on delivering a coherent approach across Scotland

- **Policy and delivery coherence across employability, childcare, social security and more.**

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It is clear from the responses from single parents that policy making is not reflective of lived reality; currently initiatives, funds or programmes are working against one another. Whilst multiple support initiatives may exist, they become inaccessible for low-income single parents as they fail to meet their needs or become stuck on rigid eligibility criteria. The inflexibility of childcare provision does not meet the needs of single parents' working lives; the way in which Universal Credit is delivered does not allow single parents to seek work available; the way employability programmes are delivered does not understand the pressures of single parenthood or include childcare cost support. Much of this is due to a lack of coherence in both policy making and programme delivery. Siloed policy making without lived experience expertise is not fit for purpose and a more coherent, person-centred approach is required from the Scottish Government and local authorities.

## Conclusion

The experiences and expertise of low-income single parents need to become a normalised part of policy making in Scotland. To enable outcomes of policy to be fit for purpose, to free people from poverty's grip, and to release opportunities.

From the single parents participating in this work, it is clear that even well-intentioned policy or programmes are not meeting their needs because they simply do not respond to the reality of their everyday experiences. In some cases, problems in the design of policies (such as Universal Credit) are proactively harming single parents' life chances.

The recommendations above are developed from the input of single parents and sense-checked by them in the hope that they deliver real positive difference to their lives.

Participating single parents emphasised that their 'saving grace' has been their work with One Parent Families Scotland or similar third sector and local support programmes. They stated that their understanding of single parents' lives, their flexible approach and empathy, all worked to improve their confidence and open more routes into the labour market. As such, more effort should be placed on Scottish Government and Local Authorities learning from, and working with, third sector delivery bodies to ensure programmes are coproduced and single parents are at the centre of them.

The Scottish Parliament is committed to reducing relative child poverty to below 10% by 2030/31, we will not do so unless we do much more to loosen the grip of poverty on single parents and their children.

## Methodology

One Parent Families Scotland, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, commissioned this report to learn more about the experiences of low- or no-income single parents on entering, staying in and progressing in, the Scottish labour market.

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The research was carried out by Iffat Shahnaz and Talat Yaqoob as part of The Collective, working with One Parent Families Scotland.

The report includes desk-based research reviewing labour market entry programmes, skills development programmes and funding support available to single parents (see appendix) and primary research conducted through focus groups and one-to-one interviews across March and April 2021. A total of 26 single parents participated in focus groups and 12 interviews took place. Single parents were from Dundee, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Lanarkshire and Fife.

A further focus group was also conducted with members of OPFS staff who work closely with single parents and support their journeys in the labour market. For those staff members that were unable to attend the focus group they fed back directly via email. The input from single parents was analysed and sense-checked again with single parent participants to ensure the interpretation was accurate and fair.

Key stages to the coproduction of the first set of recommendations and themes emerged from the OPFS single parents focus group which took place online with groups from Edinburgh, Glasgow and Lanarkshire. Part of the research also included 12 one-to-one interviews or surveys where parents shared their experiences first-hand. The draft set of recommendations were then tested with a group of the single parents who took part in the focus groups and a further nine single parents from Fife Gingerbread reviewed the key themes and recommendations, and provided their first-hand experiences through a focus group. Key points that emerged from this review have been incorporated into the final set of recommendations

Single parents taking part were all either currently in work, had recently left or lost work, and/or were proactively seeking work.

## **Profile of the parents we worked with**

Forty single parents completed the JRF research survey. From their responses we can identify the following profile.

Respondents were mostly female (98%). Just under half (48%) were aged between 35 - 44. This is in line with our expectations and understanding as it is often wrongly assumed that single parents are younger. The next two biggest age groups were 25 - 34 (28%) and 45 - 54 (18%).

Most participants (78%) were white and Scottish, with a further 15% from other white backgrounds and 7% from Asian backgrounds.

Out of the forty respondents:

- Twenty one had only one child.
- Eleven respondents had two children.
- Seven respondents had three children.
- One respondent had four children.

Twelve participants had one or more children under school age.

Just over half of parents (58%) had no other caring responsibilities compared to 28% who did, for instance, care for an older relative. More people were unemployed (53%) than were in work (48%). The working hours of those in employment ranged from five to 36 hours. Only one person was working a full 36 hours compared with shorter hours contracts for the rest, for instance 16 hours a week. It is unclear the reasons for the range of working patterns, whether for example, it was through personal choice and circumstances, or work availability and inflexible hours.

Just under half (45%) of respondents were looking for work, and 17 people had accessed employability programmes whereas 28 had not.

## Appendix

### Rapid review of current support and interventions

#### Scottish Government strategies and priorities

This overview provides analysis on interventions which have been (or are currently being) delivered to provide more pathways into the labour market (and provide access to skills development). Whilst multiple funded interventions and policies on employment and employability have been introduced, the landscape is not coherent, public bodies and local authorities which should be working together are not and most critically, little to no single-parent specific (or even single-parent friendly) programmes exist.

#### Skills and education priorities

The 2007 Scottish Government released a lifelong learning strategy focused on skills development that was accessible at any age and focused on community delivery. The agenda of 'lifelong learning' was clear and continued for the duration of that parliamentary term (until 2011). However, since then the value placed on lifelong learning (particularly in terms of financial investment) has declined, as has the accessibility of local community-focused learning delivery. This was in some ways further exacerbated by the regionalisation of colleges which centralised some delivery

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and moved multi-campus colleges into a smaller number of more central/city centre campuses. At the time, the impact on widening access and support for local communities was highlighted by National Union of Students Scotland (National Union of Students, 2016).

Since then, there has also been a reshifting in focus to full-time courses which has seen a marked decrease in the number of students enrolled in part-time or short courses education (which are 10 hours or less) - down by 37.8%. Overall, since the start of the decade, the number of college students has fallen by more than a fifth (21.9%), a decrease of 66,965 from the 305,969 who were studying in 2010-2011 (Scottish Funding Council, 2021). This links specifically to low-income single parents, who are disproportionately more likely to be women, as the drop in part-time numbers has been higher in the female population. Short courses (less than 10 hours) are both entry ways into employment and benefit in-work progression, and are more likely to be participated in by people from low-income backgrounds or who have not had the opportunity to participate in, or complete, formal education. Short courses are also more likely to be delivered during flexible hours when people with caring responsibilities or currently in work can attend. The shift to deprioritise these avenues has a significant impact on locking out the very people who are pushed furthest away from the labour market. Furthermore, the UK benefits system acts as a barrier itself to accessing further and higher education (for example, Universal Credit payments take account of student loans in higher education and conditionality acts as a barrier to single parents taking up a course, unless their child is under five years old).

## Labour market interventions

Whilst there have been a number of relevant strategies launched by the Scottish Government over the last ten years, it is only the Child Poverty Strategy and Gender Pay Gap Action Plan that make any specific mention of single/lone parents and the specific obstacles they encounter when entering or remaining in the labour market. Scotland's Labour Market Strategy (Scottish Government, 2016) states: 'A strong labour market that drives inclusive, sustainable economic growth, characterised by growing, competitive businesses, high employment, a skilled population capable of meeting the needs of employers, and where fair work is central to improving the lives of individuals and their families.' This was the start of the use of 'Inclusive Growth' as a descriptive phrase for reducing injustices in work and economic success in Scotland. Yet, to date, there has not been a more detailed look into what inclusive growth means in practice and who it works for. The strategy alludes to equalities practices however, there is no dedicated section on delivering equality within its strategic goals. Any specialist focus on people experiencing multiple discriminations, such as low-income single parents, has been lost in an attempt to 'mainstream' equalities work. Rather than mainstreaming an equalities focus has become diluted or lost altogether.

The strategy sets out 'labour market measures' (table below), **none of which (from those analysed) included any specific mention or measure for low-income single parents.**

|                               |                            |                         |   |                             |  |                             |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| <b>LABOUR MARKET MEASURES</b> | Modern Apprenticeships     | Employability Fund      | Scottish Employment Recruitment Incentive | Employability Services      | Scottish National Action Plan for Responsible Business | Fair Work Convention        |
|                               | Foundation Apprenticeships | Scottish Union Learning | Opportunities for All                     | Health and Work Initiatives | Developing the Young Workforce                         | Pay Ratios and Transparency |
|                               | Graduate Apprenticeships   | Careers Advice          | Community Jobs Scotland                   | Returners Project           | Workplace Innovation Service                           | FitWork                     |
|                               | Apprenticeship Levy        | Skills Planning Model   | Job Grant                                 | Workplace Equality Fund     | Abolish Employment Tribunal Fees                       | Business Pledge             |

| <b>Measures (which are employee/people focused, rather than business focused)</b> | <b>Specific inclusion of low-income single parents</b>   | <b>Further details and data (where publicly available)</b>  |
|---|--|---|
| Modern Apprenticeships  | Centralised to Skills Development Scotland, general equalities approach and states that it is open to all, no specific inclusion of single parents.  | Equalities data is provided quarterly – however no data on single parents is provided.<br><br>51% of MAs in training are 16-19 years old (Skills Development Scotland 2020).  |
| Graduate Apprenticeships  | Centralised to Skills Development Scotland, general equalities approach and states that it is open to all, no specific inclusion of single parents.  | Equalities data is provided quarterly – however no data on single parents is provided. Here, 51% of registered apprentices over the last three years were over 25 years old. Which indicates that it is attracting beyond non-traditional age groups and routes, however this does not tell us about their parental status. |
| Community Jobs Scotland   | Has supported over 9,000 people into work. Participants must be in at least one of 11 categories (including carers, refugees, care experiences) low-income single parents are not included as a specific category. | No break-down of data publicly available for each group was available at the time of writing. However, one category - work programme completers who remain unemployed – may be particularly helpful for low-income single parents who have been unable to find work.  |

|                         |   |   |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Returners' Project      | No funding was awarded to date to any project which looked specifically at the needs of single parents.   | Data available does not tell us whether single parents were supported, however the focus was on women returning to the labour market (in one case a specific effort focused on BAME women).   |
| Workplace Equality Fund | No funding was awarded to any project which looked specifically at the needs of single parents, whether that is in-work or into work programmes (despite there being multiple specialist projects).   | Data available does not tell us whether single parents were supported, however the focus for many was on women, women who have experienced gender-based violence, and women over 50.  |
| Scottish Union Learning | Although focused on trade union members, there are multiple projects to access employability/skills opportunities for those in-work and looking to progress in their careers.   | Specific projects include young workers and equalities focus (gender). Further breakdown of data not found.   |
| Employability fund      | Administered by Skills Development Scotland (SDS), no specific focus on single parents. Aims to provide training opportunities whilst maintaining DWP payments: Unemployed adults aged 18+ receive a training payment equal to what they would otherwise receive in DWP benefits. | No data available on those supported by the Employability fund beyond basic SDS statistics (age/gender/race/disability/care experienced).<br><br>67% of employability fund starters were 16-24 years old (Skills Development Scotland, 2021). |
| Opportunities for All   | Specifically for 16-19 year-olds not in employment or training (focused on largely traditional routes; colleges, DWP, SDS).   | No data available on single parents and no focus on this area.  |

|                                  |   |  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Young Person's Guarantee         | Specifically for 16-24 year-olds to get them into work/training/apprenticeships.  | 26 weeks of training with £100 payment per week for 1,200 young people. Unavailable data on outcomes as evaluation still to take place/data sets still to be released. |
| SDS individual training accounts | Access based on income being less than £22,000 per year – able to apply if on Universal Credit, carers allowance, job seekers allowance and other DWP benefits. | Provides £200 per year per training course, focused on in-work progression – no specific criteria or focus on single parents.  |

Highlighted above are key 'Labour Market Measures' described in the Labour Market Strategy. All have the aim to improve access for those out of work or 'under-employed' in Scotland, and within the strategy are largely described in general terms as being designed to deliver a positive equalities outcome. However, despite there being specific/specialist projects within these measures which focus on a range of marginalised groups, for example women who have experienced gender-based violence, the care experienced, young carers, refugees, new migrants, women over 50 and disabled people. There are no specific interventions for single parents. Whilst some low-income single parents will have participated, the projects are not designed specifically for the challenges faced by low-income single parents and therefore are likely to not be fully accessible to them or publicised to this group.

### Fair Work Convention

Established in 2015, the Fair Work Convention and its principles are intended to work towards 'world-leading' working lives in Scotland (Fair Work Convention, 2016), with fairness and wellbeing at the centre. The framework evidence published in 2016 includes some equalities focus largely on gender, race and disability. However, there is no specific mention of single/lone parents. There is mention of the 'changing circumstances of individuals' and caring responsibilities/parenthood, and why it is imperative for employers to respond to the needs of employees with compassion and flexibility. However, the specific challenge for single parents is left unacknowledged. In the December 2020 review (Fair Work Convention, 2021) of the convention there is, again, no mention of single parents and no recommendations for specialist support. Given the importance placed on 'fair work principles' and the push for these to be adopted across a number of labour market interventions, for example the Scottish Business Pledge and the Flexible Workforce Fund. the absence of evidence and specific recommendations which focus on the challenges for low-income single parents is an opportunity missed. It runs the risk of further embedding inequalities faced by them.

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## **A fairer Scotland for women: gender pay gap action plan**

Published in March 2019, the gender pay gap action plan (Scottish Government, 2019) does include reference to the impact on 'lone parents' as the majority are women and the impact on sustainable, fairly paid and flexible work is critical to women's progress in the labour market. However, much like the strategies and interventions discussed above, there is little in terms of specific recommendations. It does however focus on two areas which are particularly helpful for single parents. Firstly, the need for affordable and flexible childcare (which for single parents who may have the full burden of caring, is imperative for them to have a chance to enter and stay in the workplace). Secondly, the need for better data to capture a fuller picture of employability (which should ask about single parents).

### **No One Left Behind**

This is the Scottish Government strategy to design and deliver person-centred employability services distinct from the current programme delivery by DWP, after employability became devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The No One Left Behind Action Plan (Scottish Government, 2020) is a joint strategy by the Scottish Government and COSLA. What is of particular interest to this rapid review is the commitment to a shared measurement framework, which if created well, can provide a more nuanced understanding of who is benefiting from employability services, who is being supported into high-quality and fair work, and to what extent this is benefiting low-income single parents (through disaggregated data). However, as described below, this is yet to be realised. The 2018 Scottish Government review (Scottish Government 2018) of the employability programmes created as part of this strategy, illustrates the lack of consideration of single parents in their delivery. The review compliments the findings of this report, in particular it finds that the majority of programmes focus on young people and there is a lack of consideration for those experiencing multiple barriers. It states that: 'Most of the employability programmes covered by this research are focussed on young people, whereas providers believe that there is a demand for all-age provision. In addition, providers are increasingly delivering programmes that are focussed on users with multiple barriers to employment, requiring programmes to be delivered in a different way.'

### **Flexible Workforce Development Fund**

This fund is a method to invest the apprenticeship levy payment by employers who engage in apprenticeship schemes and/or are small to medium-sized businesses. It is paid to employers to re-invest in employees through skills development and in-work career development. In-work skills can be facilitated by the Open University, through colleges, or by independent providers. All employees within a business are eligible. However, access is dependent on the employer taking part, and the employer targeting this at those employees it would benefit most – there is no direct employee access method and no focus on any specific equalities group or specialist category.

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## The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-22 and Fair Start Scotland

This strategy goes the furthest in its potential to deliver for low-income single parents, as its recommendations on employability programmes are specifically tailored to respond to this group. It describes the new employability service as being focused on; lone parents, disabled people, minority ethnic groups, refugees and people who live in the 15% most deprived areas of Scotland. Whilst this is welcome, there is not reference to the reality that lone parents are more likely to also be living in the 15% most deprived areas of Scotland and how this service will understand these intersecting inequalities faced by this population group. This service called 'Fair Start' has been financed since 2018 and is delivered through local authorities. The 2020-21 budget for Fair Start Scotland delivery is £20.5 million for year one (£84 million overall).

Unlike UK Government's DWP employability services, Fair Start focuses on voluntary participation (no benefits conditionality) and provides longer-term support to find work and to stay in work. It is currently the only of the two national services in Scotland where single parents are a specific applicant category. However, given the delivery is localised and by a range of partners, these include some delivered directly by a local authority and others by private companies, for example Fedcap Employability Scotland and some by Remploy which was a Non-Departmental Public Body, sponsored by the DWP but now privately owned by Maximum. As such, there may be more difficulty in ensuring consistency in approach and ensuring that a high-quality, inclusive and person-centred programme is being delivered. The Fair Start Programme also has an 'early entry' programme for those who have been unemployed for only six months, this includes Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and lone parents, as the programme recognises that there are further challenges in returning to work for these groups even with a short break from the labour market.

A year two evaluation of Fair Start Scotland (FSS) was published in November 2020. From this it was found that 9% of referrals to FFS were single parents (up 7.5% from the first year of delivery in 2018-2019), this is higher than the Scottish unemployment population where single parents make up 5% (ONS, 2020). Positively, single parents who entered the programme were less likely than others to leave early. In telephone interviews with programme participants, single parents cited that difficulties accessing childcare played a significant role in their inability to source appropriate longer-term work, part-time work or enter the workplace at all. 47% of single parents who used the service were 'early entrants'; they had been out of work for six months only. 30% of single parents (slightly less than the average across equalities groups of 33%) were successful in starting employment. However, this drops to 23% for those still in work three months later and then to 18% of those still in work six months later.

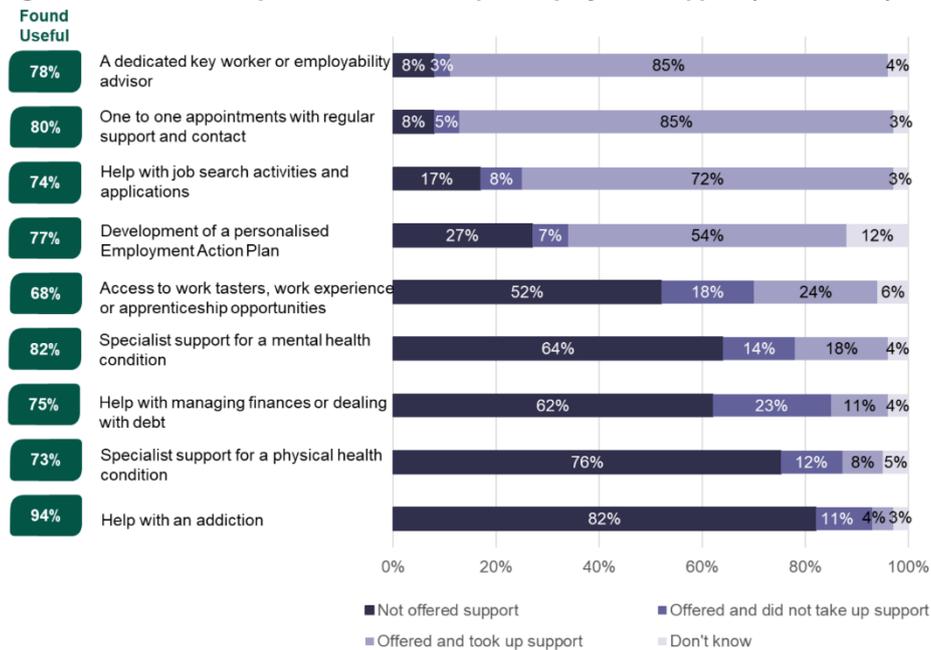
According to the evaluation report: 'FSS received 17,139 referrals in the second year, with 12,077 people joining the service (70% of all referrals). This is an increase from the 10,063 that joined FSS in year 1 and demonstrates an improved rate of successful referrals (58% of referrals in year 1 resulted in people joining the service). Compared to the unemployed population of Scotland, females, young people, individuals from

ethnic minorities and those living in rural areas were underrepresented in the second year of FSS delivery. However, the service saw a higher proportion of disabled individuals, older people (ages 35-64), lone parents and those living in the 15% most deprived areas, as measured by SIMD.'

Further telephone analysis was conducted with key participants including single parents. This found that whilst there was success in achieving employment overall, much like the DWP programme, the pay, conditions and value of employment achieved comes into question. There is potential that this employability programme may duplicate the inequalities others cause by locking single parents into low-paid work. The phone interviews found that 50% of those working had found employment in labour intensive work (which also tends to come with precarious contracts) for example in cleaning, caring and catering sectors. 66% were earning less than £9.30 an hour and one in ten were on zero hour contracts.

All providers of Fair Start Scotland service must provide support to participants such as mentoring, CV skills, one-to-one sessions, introductions to employers, specialist services (such as mental health support or interpreters) and more. The majority of participants were aware of the support services on offer, made use of them and found them helpful. The image below from the Fair Start Scotland Year 2 evaluation phone surveys explains offers of support and the extent of their usefulness:

**Figure 3.1: Offer, take-up and usefulness of pre-employment support (2019 cohort)**



The overall experience of those who took part in the programme and phone interviews was positive, with 91% stating they were treated with dignity and respect, 80% stating they felt their individual needs were taken into account, and 81% stating they felt participation improved their wellbeing. However, this data is not disaggregated by participation group, therefore we cannot determine the specific experience of single parents or compare to other groups of participants.

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Whilst the majority left the programme because they had found work (19%), 5% left the programme due to caring responsibilities. Although there is no further detail in the data provided, more positively, 43% who mentioned family or caring responsibilities as a barrier to work felt the support they received from FSS helped them to overcome this.

A lack of disaggregated data makes it difficult to determine the extent to which FSS has delivered effectively to date for single parents. Whilst the data in the year 2 evaluation is positive in terms of support, there are questions to be asked about the quality, pay and conditions of the end employment destinations of the participants who complete the programme. This issue of incomplete data across the strategy to tackle child poverty is also emphasised by the Poverty and Inequality Commission review (Poverty and Inequality Commission, 2020). Alongside this, although we know some information about the number of single parents accessing these services, we do not have intersecting data to tell us how many of them are from low-income backgrounds or the 15% of the most deprived geographical areas.

## **Parental Employability Support Fund**

This fund of £12.1 million is being administered through 2019-2022 with £7.35 million for this financial year by local authority tenders which will focus on delivery support to low-income parents. A further expansion of investment has been committed to, focusing on linking employability services with childcare delivery to prevent childcare availability from being a barrier to skills development or employment. The fund follows a similar delivery plan to that of Fair Start Scotland, however it is specifically for parents and supports both those who require entry into work, or help to progress in work. Delivery is through local authorities and focuses on:

- Person-centred help to address parents' barriers to work, which might include health support, money advice or motivational support.
- Help meeting the increasing challenge of in-work poverty, targeting in-work support to help parents already in jobs to remain in the workplace and gain progression through a rewarding career.

At the point of writing no evaluation data was available on the effectiveness of the Parental Employability Support Fund. The latest information regarding data collection was provided through a parliamentary question in October 2020 in which the following answer was received: 'Parental Employability Support Fund, delivered in partnership with Local Government targets priority families, who are evidenced to be at a higher risk of poverty. Parental Employment Support Fund data is currently being collated centrally and we are considering how best to publish routine updates.'

The Parental Employability Support fund has since been further expanded to include a specific investment for Disabled Parents, which will focus on bespoke delivery and one-to-one tailored support. However, the Poverty and Inequality Commission has stated

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that it is disappointed that more progress has not been made and that the fund remains in the scoping stage.

## **Job Start Payment**

The Job Start Payment is £250 for young people (between 16-24) which is increased to £400 for those with children. It exists to support individuals with the cost (such as childcare) in the transition to employment after being out of work and receiving a low-income benefit for at least six months. As the fund was launched in August 2020, there is no evaluation data yet, however given this has a focus both on those on low-income benefits and those with children, it would be hoped that any evaluation asks specifically if people who received the £400 payment are single parents.

## **Local government delivery and accessibility**

To compliment this paper a rapid online review of local authority delivery was conducted (with some data still to be provided). Overall, it is clear there is a lack of consistency of the provision of information on employability services. All local authorities provide general information on employability and signpost to Scottish Government strategies or resources linked to local Skills Development Scotland centres, local third sector groups, general funds, or colleges.

However, employability information tends to focus on the school age to 24-year-old category, with mention of the No One Left Behind strategy. Employability is talked about in a traditional sense and is not particularly well targeted. Out of 32 local authorities, 17 had no specific mention of the Parental Employability Fund or Fair Start Scotland. Of the vast majority of those who did mention targeted employability approaches (for specific communities, for example parents) only three (Moray, Orkney, Renfrewshire) had any specific mention of single parents in their employability pages.

Worryingly, for many council websites, where there is mention of FSS or the Parental Employability Fund, it is found within news article pages which after time can be lost and become less prominent. Unless single parents were to know what the employability programmes were specifically called, they would not know what to search for and what they have access to. Given single parents are more likely to check their local council website than they are a specialist service provider, which is unknown to them, making this information more accessible is a simple but important change that should be made quickly.

## **Devolution of employability and reserved conditionality**

Fair Start Scotland is the first fully devolved employability programme, in line with the Social Security Scotland principles of dignity, fairness and respect, participation is voluntary and without conditionality. However, with significant parts of the welfare system still reserved, for example Universal Credit single parents still face conditionality, which in some cases may be up to 16 hours a week spent job searching in order to be eligible to receive welfare support. In future evaluations of both FSS and the Parental Employment Fund Scotland, it would be sensible to ask participants to

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what extent UK Government conditionality on benefits impacts their participation, or is the rationale for their participation creating indirect conditionality.

## **In-Work development opportunities**

In-work continuing professional development opportunities, whilst encouraged by the Scottish Government across the labour market, are still the privilege of people working in higher-paid and office-based work. The majority of this type of investment exists largely privately and is dependent on the commitment of individual employers. The Skills Development Scotland individual training accounts funding, the only national publicly funded programme, focuses on those in low-paid work (however there is no specific focus on single parents). Despite being launched in 2017, no evaluation and no equalities monitoring data is available from SDS to tell us whether this employability intervention is reaching people who need it most, including single parents .

## **Notes**

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## About the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent social change organisation working to solve UK poverty. Through research, policy, collaboration and practical solutions, we aim to inspire action and change that will create a prosperous UK without poverty.

We are working with private, public and voluntary sectors, and people with lived experience of poverty, to build on the recommendations in our comprehensive strategy - [We can solve poverty in the UK](#) - and loosen poverty's grip on people who are struggling to get by. It contains analysis and recommendations aimed at the four UK governments.

All research published by JRF is available to download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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