



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty

COVID-19

Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring Report



Issue 13 - May / June 2021








Parents Experiences



OPFS has developed a model of gathering the experiences of single parents through our local services and national channels to capture key areas of concern for single parents.

To ensure that we understand the ongoing impact of the pandemic we publish a bi-monthly '**COVID-19 Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring Report**'. OPFS gathers parents 'experiences through our 5 local teams, our national advice and information service and website. There are five elements:

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-  **Gathering 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:** 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.



The report is organised into broad categories, which reflect the topics single parents get in contact with us about. The report then describes the key themes within these areas which are:

- 1. Health and Wellbeing**
- 2. Social Security Benefits**
- 3. Money and Family Income**
- 4. Family Wellbeing**
- 5. Seperating / Being a Single Parent**
- 6. Work / Education and Training**
- 7. Children**

Main Findings

This report highlights that mental health remains a prominent concern for many families. The biggest challenge facing single parents over the last 18 months has been the impact of COVID-19 - from juggling work and home-schooling, to making ends meet for those who lost their jobs or couldn't find work, whilst also supporting their children finding time to look after their own mental health.

Single Parents experiences during May and June revolve around poverty related issues and family need such as their future without adequate financial support, fraught relationships with partners, finding employment and coping with deteriorating mental health.





1. Health and Wellbeing

Stress, Anxiety and Mental Health

- Some parents report problems with dyslexia and literacy. Their anxiety around this is affecting their ability to progress, for example, not being able to complete application forms for employment.
- The Government's extended COVID-19 restrictions in Glasgow over May and June. This has led to significant challenges for parents and impacting on their mental health. Families found it difficult to plan ahead / make commitments with work or college due to children being sent home from school to self-isolate.
- The Falkirk service reports an increase in crisis referrals, with a few parents returning to using addictive substances. Due to the limited access to social work services because of home working, it is still very difficult for parents to speak to their named social workers when there are these kinds of issues.
- Parents require continual reassurances that things will be alright both now and in future - family support workers in Dundee have been supporting parents and emphasising that things will take time and change is not always a negative.





Falkirk Services - Supporting Families

Family Support Worker noted,

I currently have two families that I support that are self-isolating for 10 days due to being tracked and traced through secondary school. One of the parents had severe mental health issues and is struggling with the isolation and having both of his children in the house without any practical support. Our service is offering phone support to him.

The other father has chromosome deletion syndrome with the impact like Autism/Asperger's. Our service is keeping in contact with the family by phone and offering any practical support that we can, but there has been a marked decline in the father's general mental health and wellbeing. The school has now been closed for a week due to the high number of cases and a testing station has been set up in the school grounds. Hopefully it will be open again before the start of the summer holidays.

One of the mums, our service currently supports, is struggling now but mental health services are still not operating due to COVID-19. She was due to start the intense year long piece of work just as services were closing due to coronavirus. She had been removed from all other mental health support services as the group work was meant to have taken over this. The mother has some social work input and has gone from being a full-time carer/parent for her young daughter to only being able to cope with one night per week and even struggling with this at times. As her issues are very specific and requiring the intense group work, other services are struggling to support her.





Dundee Family Support Work

Family Support Worker noted,

The parents I am supporting just now all have very different issues.

The parents that are feeling anxious about going out and about were struggling with this kind of anxiety prior to lockdown. I am currently supporting two parents to get back to the stage they were at prior to lockdown.

I think the thought of seven weeks off is overwhelming for parents who struggled to keep children entertained during lockdown. I have a variety of different issues going on with families which are not directly related to the pandemic, for example, child contact arrangements, poor physical health and managing challenging behaviour.

The parents I meet all say they feel better after getting things off their chest. I have also started meeting some parents for a coffee which they are really enjoying as it is a reason for them to get out of the house.

Supporting parents with teenagers with challenging behaviour, particularly with girls aged 12-15, can be frustrating as there appears to be very little progress made. However, parents have told me they feel better knowing they have a time where they can just talk about the recent problems they have had with their teenager.

Parent Quotes

Lockdown has raised several issues in our family and both my daughter and my self's mental health has deteriorated. Managing this is a worry.

I just feel heavy like I can't shake this feeling at the moment.

I feel frustrated. I should be doing more there is only so many times I can take him to the same park, I don't even like the park but there is nowhere else to go.



2. Social Security Benefits

Universal Credit (UC)

The roll-out of Universal Credit is continuing with nearly 60% of single parents now having transferred onto this benefit¹.

- Under Universal Credit rules, single parents must become job seekers when their youngest child reaches the age of three or face a sanction. However, parents have told us:
- Flexibilities (Easements) agreed by DWP for single parents with younger children to have a shorter commuting time, fewer working hours and opportunities to train are not routinely communicated to parents and instead they are offered a generic service which does not meet their needs.
- Single parents find it particularly challenging to secure work of 16 hours that is local to their home as well as the vital affordable childcare which has the flexibility needed to fit with available jobs.
- One of the most harmful effects of Universal Credit to the single parent families we work with has been the instability it causes. After the initial financial and emotional shocks of moving onto Universal Credit, debt, housing insecurity and job uncertainty is the pattern for many families.
- With restrictions lifting single parents are rightly concerned about how these changes will impact them and their families, particularly with school holidays ending soon and infection rates rising.
- Single parents have told us they are worried about what will happen as the support that many have depended on to make ends meet finishes. For example, the closures of the Furlough Scheme, Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, Test and Trace Support Payments, and the £20 uplift in Universal Credit ending in September will leave many single parent families in a precarious financial position.

¹ Calculated using the number of single parent households in receipt of UC in May 2020, (DWP's [Stat-Xplore - Log in \(dwp.gov.uk\)](https://www.dwp.gov.uk/stat-xplore) and data on the number of single parents in the UK. ([Families and households - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/families-and-households))



- Young single parents have found they are up to £66.13 worse off per month under Universal Credit compared with the legacy system - a drop of 20%. People under 25 get paid a lower level of benefit than people aged 25 and over, but before Universal Credit was introduced there was an exemption for single parents in recognition of the cost of caring for a child alone. Now, that exemption has been removed².

I used to be on Jobseeker's Allowance, which was a bit more money than Universal Credit, so I was losing out on money on that, and because I'm under 25 I'd be getting even less money. I don't understand how someone over 25 gets more for being in the same situation that I am. I'm a single parent as much as a 25-year-old is a single parent, we both need to buy the same things.

Other Benefits

The Advice & Information service dealt with queries on a wide range of benefits from parents. Some examples include:

As a single father of a three-month-old daughter I am struggling financially. My ex-partner has been keeping the Child Benefit. What can I claim?

I need help to apply for Carer's Allowance and I'm dyslexic. Not sure if I can even apply for it.

How do I claim the Bereavement Support Payment and am I eligible for this? Also how do you speak to young children that are bereaved and where can I get support with this.



3. Money and Family Income

Financial Concerns & Poverty

- The OPFS Glasgow service reports that parents continue to struggle with food, fuel insecurity and still face challenges with their rent arrears.
- Parents are still looking for help with their energy costs and rising debt.
- The OPFS Edinburgh service have distributed laptops and mobile phones to families for those parents who still required assistance with accessing digital devices.

“We have issued 14 mobiles with SIMs which give the parents unlimited calls and texts and 10G data for 12 months. The feedback has been very positive from parents we have supported. However, many parents are still looking for iPad’s, mobile phones and laptops.” (Edinburgh Family Support Worker)

“I was made redundant during lockdown and financially I am suffering. Keeping my house and children safe as we come out of this is my worry. (Parent)

“My landlord is selling up and I have to find somewhere else to live and do not have the rent deposit. (Parent)





4. Family Wellbeing

Increased stresses on family relationships

- Domestic violence continues to feature prominently. Families are needing a lot of support after their children witness violent behaviour towards their mothers. Children are needing access to counselling services; mothers are left with severe anxiety.

“My ex-partner has displayed coercive control for many years, now he is saying negative comments about me to my children. The children are confused. I am worried how this will affect them when they grow up.

(Parent)”

Glasgow Family Support Services - Karen

Having fled a long-term abusive relationship Karen became a single parent in 2019, living in the North-East of Glasgow, she has the sole care and responsibility of her 2 dependent, teenage children.

The difficult transitions of becoming a single parent and being unemployed have weighed heavily on Karen's ability to navigate her way through single parenthood and the benefits system. Her mental health was affected by the daily challenges she faced which were compounded by feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety.

COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have had a drastic impact on the family income due to Karen having to give up her employment.

She contacted the OPFS Freephone Helpline Service where she talked about the range of complex issues she faced:

- Unable to access furlough support as she did not fit the eligibility criteria.
- Unfamiliar with the current benefit system as the family had previously earned an above average wage.
- Unaware of the support and services available to help her as she had felt able to deal with her personal issues alone for so many years.
- Concerned about debts and paying her self-employment tax bill.
- Worrying about the impact of having previous criminal convictions and the affect this would have on her ability to find alternative employment.



- Concerns about living with dyslexia and worried about making mistakes or providing the wrong information.
- Lacking in confidence, and self-esteem due to the stress, worry and anxiety of her new circumstances and not being able to provide for her children.
- No close friends or family support.

By talking to a Helpline advice worker Karen was able to gain help, advice, support, and information from OPFS to address some of these issues. She was then able to make an informed decision on the types of support that would best meet the needs of her family. These included, Welfare Rights, Money & Debt Advice, Crisis Support, Family Support, One-to-One and Peer Support, and Employability Services with priority access to OPFS Holiday Food Programme.

OPFS Financial Inclusion Service provided:

- Completion of a Family Financial Review to assess the benefits that Karen was entitled to apply for as an unemployed single parent with 2 teenage children.
- Specialist help, advice, and support to make her online claim to UC.
- Provision of crisis support from OPFS Family Essentials Bank to enable her to provide the basics for herself and her children during the UC assessment period i.e., heating, hot water, food etc. This included provision of OPFS Fuel Crisis Voucher, completion of small Charitable Applications, Pantry Parcels and toiletries and referral to local foodbank.
- Realistic payment plans negotiated, agreed, and put in place with HMRC and creditors.
- Support with building family budgeting skills.
- Completion of in-work calculations at 16, 21, 35 and 40 hours.

The support from OPFS meant Karen was in receipt of all benefit entitlements and aware of the conditions and conditionality that she must adhere to regarding her UC claim, to prevent any threat of sanction. She was better able to better manage her family finances and now aware of where and how to access help to prevent further future crisis. As a result, Karen had reduced feelings of stress, worry and anxiety. She feels more in control of her life and better able to manage the transition of her life as a single parent.



OPFS Family Support Service provided

- Regular one-to-one meetings helping Karen build her confidence, self-esteem and improve her sense of well-being, continue to address the issues and barriers she faces in relation to relationship breakdown, mental health and unemployment caused and compounded by COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Helping her as a single parent to reduce her sense of stigma and the means needed to access the right support at the right time to sustain the progress, she has made in addressing her current circumstances.
- Support to participate in OPFS:
 - Local Single Parent Community Well-being Hub: further reducing her sense of isolation, access to peer support and a raised awareness and access to local resources and services.
 - Holiday Food Programme: Ensuring Karen and her children had access to healthy, nutritious meals and fun, family activities during the school holidays.
- External referrals to mental health services: Life-link, SAMH and Breathing Space

As a result of the family support Karen had an improved sense of confidence, self-esteem and is more optimistic about what the future holds for herself and her children. She has a good network of information and peer support through new friendships and a sense of being a part of a community project that is healthy and nurturing. She is now able to connect into support with others who face similar circumstances while gaining the understanding and tools that she needs to better manage her issues with mental health. She knows she can access OPFS, local, online and telephone services - a positive reference point for building healthy relationships that encourage and support her to progress.





OPFS Employability Service provided

- Completion of an 'Individual Needs Assessment.'
- Monthly one-to-one advice and guidance meetings to address barriers to accessing suitable and sustainable employment opportunities.
- Regular weekly attendance and participation at OPFS:
 - Local Single Parent Peer Support Hub
 - Skills Boost Sessions
 - Job Club
 - Access to resources and training materials

The employability support from OPFS has enabled Karen to develop her C.V. and gain suitable referees. The 'Preparing for future' approach has enabled Karen to take up active job search, get training on completing job application forms and interview skills. She has Identified the sector that she would like to work in and identified her future goals and actively participating in employability activities that will help her to achieve these. Karen has also been supported to access citywide services for example the Glasgow Guarantee. She is aware of the impact returning to work will have on her family finances and is feeling more optimistic about the future. Through the provision of a chrome book by OPFS Karen has equal access to the services and resources that will help her to engage and participate in positive activities.





In Karen's Words

Life has changed so much for me and my kids since April last year, sometimes for the better. However, it has been the hardest of times for us. I know that it is difficult for everyone but having to end my relationship and move my kids home and school as well as losing my job, our income and having nowhere to turn has been very hard. It's all been made worse by children not being able to go to school, followed by the school holidays, me not being able to provide even the basics things I needed for my kids, not even hot water or heating, sometimes not enough food. I did everything I could to try and make sure they had enough, I wouldn't have lunch or dinner, but anything I did just wasn't enough. It made me feel unwell, alone, and scared. It's such a struggle when you feel like things can't get any worse, but you don't know where to turn and you just can't face telling anyone about your life.

I wish I could have found it easier to ask for help. When I contacted OPFS they made things so easy for me to speak about the problems I faced, no judgement just friendly help. They helped me to sort out my money, my debts and start getting back on my feet. I've made some good friends and can now see a way out of this terrible mess that I have found myself in. I keep hearing people on the radio and TV talking about the new normal, well I've needed a new normal and OPFS are helping me to do this. I've started going along to the groups and training courses and have started applying for jobs. Jobs that will let me be there for my kids and let me give them the things they need to grow-up well. Our lives will never be the same again, but in so many ways, that's for the best. OPFS have helped us through the worst of times. They've introduced me to services that I never knew about. It's so important not to feel alone during these very difficult times and I don't! I really feel like things are going to get better for me and my kids and that we will get our new normal."



5. Separating/ Being a Single Parent

Recurring question

- Parents report ongoing difficulties with custody battles and other issues with their ex-partners.

“ My ex -partner is keeping a hold of my 12-year-old daughter’s passport. What are my rights if he does not return it as I may need it later in the year for a holiday? He is a very controlling person. ”

- As the summer holidays begin, parents are keen to find opportunities to get out of the house to do activities with their children where possible. Often the cost of travel prevents parents from taking up access to free facilities and events.

“ I have custody of my two children as their mother has addiction issues. Social work is involved. They do not want to see their mother anymore. I am finding it very stressful. (Parent) ”

“ I was rejected by other agencies before I called OPFS because things weren’t bad enough. I would be in tears and felt like running away when things got difficult but now, I know I can talk to you. Getting things off my chest makes it easier to cope. ”

(Single mum of 10-Year-old and 12-year-old)

“ Being able to talk things through helps me see things clearly and it helps me make decisions about how I should handle situations. ”

(Single dad of 13-year-old)

“ It is the little things in life. I didn’t realise how much I needed you until this pandemic and I am so appreciative to have you for support. ”

(Parent)



“

I have been let down by so many people, but you have always been there, and I don't know how I would have coped. I know you will always do what you say and if I need to leave a message you always get back to me. I don't get this from other workers. You make me feel that I am important even when I phone with small things like my meltdown over school shoes.

(Single mum of seven-year-old.)

”

Falkirk Family Support Services

Family Support Worker,

“I have one single mum who regularly returns for advice and support around parenting her daughter; this is solely work around parenting, which includes strategies for getting the daughter to manage the transition between school and home.

Parents all say they feel better after getting things off their chest. I have started meeting some parents for a coffee which they are really enjoying as it gives them a reason to get out of the house and change of scenery.”

Group Work Co-ordinator,

“Everyone coming along to the groups seem to be quite upbeat, glad to see restrictions lifting and looking forward to having more contact with their friends and getting their children back to soft play centres.

A couple of concerns still around using public transport, but all the parents agree they will be happier after they are fully vaccinated.

The service is running a summer playscheme and parents have said they would be keen to join in as it would be lovely to get back together with other parents at the centre.”



6. Work / Education and Training

Employment & Employability

- COVID-19 has made work incredibly difficult or even impossible for many single parents who are parenting alone. Single parents in touch with OPFS often work in insecure jobs or on zero-hours contracts. They are much more likely to have worked in shut-down industries, such as retail or hospitality.
- Getting support to move into paid work remains a priority for many single parents. They again face pressure from JCP to look for paid work or face a sanction.
- Single parents continue to seek advice about needing flexibility and negotiating with employers when a child is sick or needing to self-isolate.
- Parents needing support and advice on ways to help them stay focused on employment during the upcoming summer holidays.
- Some parents using the Edinburgh service have faced additional challenges finding employment due to their problems with reading and writing because of their Dyslexia. This condition has led to loss of confidence, struggling to find the right support and anxious about applying for jobs.

“Where can I get help with my CV and how can I get Skills Development Scotland to help me?” Glasgow Single Parent”

“I want to apply for a degree course. What help can I get from SAAS? Dundee Single Parent”

“I’ve had lots of issues with my son’s nursery and am concerned about him starting school. He has unspecified additional support needs and I’ve applied for DLA for him. I’m on Universal Credit but how can I apply for jobs etc when he needs my support and attention at the moment?”



Dundee Family Support Services

I am struggling to find practical support for two mums. Dyslexia organisations simply say to look on their website or chat with their online advisers but if you are dyslexic then this, of course, poses problems.

As parents noted,

It is making me anxious about looking for work as I am worried it will be held against me when I apply for jobs as its obvious, I struggle with written English.

I am worried I have dyslexia and I need support but not sure where to find it.

I have always struggled, I struggled at school but hardly got any help. I even struggle with telling the time, that's how bad my dyslexia is.





Conclusion

The impact of the COVID-19 virus - lockdowns, home schooling, lack of face-to-face contact - has had an immense effect on the parents, children, and young people OPFS gives advice and support to.

The negative effect on isolated parents experiencing a lack of peer and family support has been traumatic. Some families have been pushed into extreme poverty experiencing stigma, shame and loss of self-esteem, particularly those finding they needed to use a foodbank.

We are very concerned about the delayed impact of trauma and adverse economic circumstances on parents, children and young people's mental health wellbeing. This needs to be looked at from a systems perspective, in the context of family circumstances and the role played by various institutions like schools and youth and mental health services. Holistic parental and family support is key, with a major investment needed.



One Parent Families Scotland

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

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