



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty

COVID-19

Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring Report



Issue 14 - July / August 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

The impact of the pandemic has reinforced the everyday challenges that parents and children face. This report particularly highlights that domestic abuse and family support are the main concerns during the period of July and August.

Single parents' experiences often revolve around financial issues (such as universal credit problems, child maintenance), bereavement related issues and finding new ways to support their children through these constant struggles. In addition, strained relationships due to domestic abuse and coercive control from ex-partners are negatively affecting mental health of parent and child alike.





1. Health and Wellbeing

Stress, Anxiety and Mental Health

Mental health continues to be a prominent issue for many parents, for example, the impact of isolation and the struggle of supporting a child with disability such as autism.

I need to connect with other single parents in Scotland. I am working but feel isolated at the weekends. Is there anything in Edinburgh?

I have recently been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. I also have mental health issues and I am struggling where can I get support.

I am anxious all the time and worried it will affect my employment if I have mental health issues.





2. Your Money

Financial Concerns & Poverty

Parents continue to struggle financially, especially during the summer period when they were planning activities for their children, requiring help with medical costs, and seeking financial grants to help alleviate the pressure on money constraints.

“What can I do with my children over the school holidays, I have very little money?”

“My child needs a special diet can my Dr or Health Visitor help with the costs of this as I am struggling with money.”

“I am looking for a Grant to help my child with ADHD attend a sports activity. How can I get help with this?”





Frances - a single parent's experience of the impact of disability

Frances is a single parent who lives with her daughter aged 7 years. She suffers from chronic anxiety and her daughter has autism and other related illnesses. She is renting a property from a Housing Association.

Frances was referred to OPFS for assistance as she was struggling to provide food for herself and her daughter. She was also in need of additional support with fuel costs and essential items for her home. A family finance review was carried out and the following immediate crisis support was provided:

- 'Fuel Insecurity Payment' (supermarket vouchers emailed direct to the parent for immediate use).
- 'Mega Grant Fuel Payment' provided (text sent direct to parent's mobile phone for immediate use).
- Aberlour 'Essential items' application made for white goods (payment made via BACS within 5 days to parents' bank account).
- Social Welfare Fund Crisis Payment was successfully claimed.

The OPFS Advisor also identified further benefits that the family would be entitled to and was supported to complete an application for the mobility component of Child DLA due to her daughters increased support needs. Frances at subsequent meetings, highlighted that she had requested a transfer to a ground floor house due to her daughter's mobility issues, but as she had rent arrears this would not be possible. The Adviser contacted her landlord and third-party deductions were put in place and an agreement made that this would not stop her being offered a transfer. The adviser also arranged that an outstanding repair bill be written off and negotiated reduced payment for Council Tax arrears.



3. Support for you

Increased stresses on family relationships

Parent's reported feeling overwhelmed by stress and anxiety due to their ex-partners controlling and violent behaviour.



I have fled domestic abuse in England and have now settled in Scotland. When will this fear go away as I am terrified my ex-partner will find us again.



Gill - a single parent's experience of domestic violence.

Gill is a single mum with a young daughter aged 6 years. She is originally from Eastern Europe and moved to Scotland recently with her husband. They have since separated due to domestic abuse, and she now has her own tenancy with a Housing Association.

This was an extremely difficult time for Gill as she had just lost her job due to COVID-19 and she was unsure how she would cope financially. The OPFS Advisor carried out a family financial review to assess Gill's current financial situation and supported her in the first instance to successfully claim Universal Credit (UC), a part upfront payment and council tax reduction... contd.





The Advisor also made an application for Fuel and Food support to allow Gill to reduce the amount of upfront payment she needed to request from UC and reduce the weekly amount she would need to pay back.

On assessing her housing and living conditions, Gill highlighted that her young daughter had no bed or wardrobe. She had grown out of her cot bed and had been sleeping with her mum since the age of 4. An application was made to Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) and Aberlour Essentials Fund for these essential items.

Over several appointments it was clear that she was struggling with poor mental health and the advisor identified further support that she may be entitled to and made applications. A referral was also made to SAMH and the OPFS Family Support team to provide her with ongoing support due to the domestic abuse that she was still facing from her ex-husband.

Gill also met with the OPFS Employability Co-ordinator and is now taking part in the Employability Programme for Single Parents and a range of activities including Peer Support Hub that will support her to eventually return to work.





4. Separating/ Being a Single Parent

Children - Sole Care responsibilities

The Helpline has had a few calls from single parents facing difficulties living with angry and aggressive children who are coping with abandonment and the other parent having left due to addiction issues. The issue with bereavement was also highlighted. Parents on their own can find it difficult discussing death and dying with their children and supporting them through the bereavement process.

“ How do I speak to my children about bereavement? ”

“ I’m on my own with little or no support I’m not coping very well. Where can I get help/support for my child and I? ”

“ I have six children the older ones get very upset as their mother quite often does not turn up to see them as she has addiction issues. ”

What can I tell them? ”

“ My partner has left me, and I am six months pregnant, I am devastated, and how will I cope. I must speak to my employer soon about Statutory Maternity Pay. I might think of changing my working hours will I be able to claim Universal Credit at all? ”

“ Single father is very concerned about his young son, as the child’s mother left the family saying she will not return. The son is understandably upset all the time and will not attend school. ”

How does he explain this to his son? ”



Summer activities for families

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic local OPFS services held many summer activities for families across the country, during the months of July and August. OPFS Falkirk for example offered a range of support to single parents and children during the summer months including

“... a host of Family Events for five weeks of the summer holidays every Tuesday and Thursday which included: Messy Play, Arts and Crafts, Build it Make It, Accessory Making, Painting, Outdoor Games, meetings at Muiravonside and a Sports day. These events brought families together as we offered a healthy meal where families sat and ate together.

Parents and children were then encouraged to explore the activities together and with other families. Although each day had a theme for play, we recognised that not all children had the same ability. We, therefore, ensured we had games for all ages and different activities for younger and older children. All activities were delivered outside in our enclosed garden which meant that families had the opportunity to connect and speak to their neighbours and peers.

For the middle five weeks of the summer holidays, we offered a weekly Transition Group for children moving into Primary seven and High School. The children attended the following activities: A boat trip to Inchcolm Island, Canoe Orienteering at Kinlochard, adventure at East Links Family Park, Kite Flying at Crammond Island and den building at B’Craigs Country Park.

During these events children were offered healthy snacks and given the opportunity to discuss their worries and fears around moving to primary seven and high school. Staff were also on hand to discuss troublesome and worrying issues. Children drew up their own ground rules and were responsible for packing everything they needed for the trip. More confident children were encouraged to team up with less confident children.

Throughout this period children developed friendships. We have agreed to host a reunion party after the children have settled into their new school routines.

The services offered to both parents and children helped to improve their mental health and wellbeing whilst also discussing the return to school. They were also able to work through any anxieties that they had to help alleviate them before heading back to school.”



5. Your children

Child contact & Child Maintenance

Parents reported problems with child contact arrangements and maintenance payments. These included the additional financial strain of charges on payments. Parents highlighted concerns about the financial implications of not receiving child maintenance payments.

“My daughter is 16, left school and is looking for work – “When do I legally stop paying child maintenance for her?”

“My ex-partner is not paying me any Child Maintenance as he is self-employed. I am worried about sending the children to stay with him as he has a new partner and she moved in with him very quickly, I don't know anything about her.”

Spotlight: Child Maintenance

We recently conducted a survey to canvas the views of single parents on the Child Maintenance Service (CMS). The aim was to have a better insight into parents' experiences of using the service and identify service improvements.

The feedback from single parents indicates that the CMS is not currently providing effective support to families. It is clear from the responses that there are a number of flaws in the way the service is currently operating. These include a lack of follow up when families experience unpaid payments from ex-partners, limited enforcement, poor communication by the CMS helpline and email services along with additional charges for the receiving parent. All of which reinforces the point that low-income single parents are consistently being disadvantaged by a system which is intended to protect and aid them financially.



For the most part the feedback was primarily negative as parents reported consistent challenges including, additional stress, inconsistent payments, lack of relevant and clear advice and support and limited enforcement capabilities.

“ Not very pleased with it. The paying parent is constantly late with his payments, can skip some, changes agreed payment dates... I don't think the enforcement of pay is working at all. The ongoing assessments are confusing.

I know my ex-partner can be dodgy and hide his actual pay and I don't feel that the calculations made are reliable. ”

“ The system runs very slowly. They used the information that my ex-partner was on benefits which was over a month out of date despite both him and I confirming he was in work. The amount is calculated and does not reflect overtime. He can earn thousands more in a year and then it's only recalculated for the following year. The criteria for working out payments is very limited and very poor. It should include children at university as children should not have to take parents to court to get basic support for education- there should be an easy system to claim appropriate support. The system is not fit for purpose. ”

“ Constantly promising enforcement action but never done. Told one thing by one person and then the total opposite. There is history of benefits and parental fraud on the Non-Resident Parental Responsibility side. I'm living on child benefit currently and last year I had to choose between which of my children could have school uniform to go back to school. I have been living a nightmare and I have even considered suicide over this. ”



“ So, my ex-partner is classed as a non-compliant payer, it's been 16 years, we get £17.00 a month from bailiffs now we've went years without a penny and the bailiffs take account of his ongoing payments as an outgoing even though he doesn't pay them!! They are no use. It's crazy he owes thousands. ”

These quotes serve to highlight the plight of those parents who require consistent payments from their ex-partners but receive inconsistent support from the CMS.

It was clear from the feedback that CMS should be reviewed to reflect the needs of low-income single parents with full childcaring responsibilities. We noted some important recommendations proposed by parents themselves to improve the service:

“ Much tougher penalties for non-paying parents instead of threats which come to nothing! Why have children to suffer because the parent chooses not to pay and have zero consequences! I am owed thousands of pounds like almost £300 grand at £17 a month. How is that feeding his daughter. ”





There should be a 3 strikes system where paying parents should face criminal charges for non-payment and evasion tactics. There should be a set period for non-payment to escalate and CMS be held accountable. Each parent with care should have a named case worker. The HMRC should work with the CMS and any other law enforcement agencies to pursue paying parents who flout the system in a timely manner.

Harsher consequences for non-payment, shorter deadlines for contact being made and enforced. Continuous enforcement of directly going to employer when there is a pattern and history of dodging the very simple and ineffective processes.

I would improve the customer service; those working with communicating with parents using the service can be so insensitive when discussing personal situations and lacking in knowledge about the services provided.

Enforcement has been followed through communication regarding missed payments co-created with mums. Those in most need should not be penalised. It is like they say if you don't have positive relationships with ex-partner then you have more hardships. The CMS should be caring and compassionate to help parents. It's another way the system punishes you for not being [part of a standard 2 couple family]. The mental strain and stress this system cause mums is a disgrace and worse of all it feels like no-one cares. This was all put through with no-one sticking up for the vulnerable.



Observation

During the late summer months of July and August, the period of this report, we find that financial pressures on single parents have become even more acute. The support from the CMS is crucial but apparently insufficient. This is not only related to providing appropriate financial payments but also safeguarding the receiving parents from their coercive ex-partners continued financial abuse. Consequently, parents are becoming more reliant on family, friends, support/advocacy agencies such as OPFS. Single Parents need a better functioning CMS to protect their human rights.

As an organisation we will continue to lobby the UK Government to listen to and involve single parents in developing a CMS which is fit for purpose.





One Parent Families Scotland

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