



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty

COVID-19

Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring Report



Issue 15 - October / November 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 Impact Monitoring Report. OPFS gathers parent experiences through our five local team, 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 seven broad categories, which reflect the topics single parents get in contact with us about.

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

The report describes any emerging themes within these categories.

Main Findings

The main findings during October-November reflect the rising financial pressures on families due to the continued struggles resulting from,

- the pandemic
- reduction in family income because of the recent Universal Credit Cut
- the rise in energy costs.

The anxiety over the upcoming Christmas period only serves to reinforce the financial worries parents are experiencing. Families we are in touch with are at breaking point. For many, it is unclear how they are going to make ends meet from one day to the next, let alone think ahead to the future.





1. Health and Wellbeing

It is noteworthy that all previous COVID-19 reports have highlighted the pressures on single parents' mental health, significantly tested during this pandemic. Parents frequently describe their challenges with anxiety, loss of confidence and worries for the future.

“Where can she get more intensive support for her depression?”

“My work coach at Universal Credit is saying I must get a job soon. I have been diagnosed with severe depression and social anxiety I cannot leave the house. I am really struggling.”

“I cannot see a decent future for myself and my children.”





2. Social Security Benefits

- Bridging Payments - Do you need to apply for these payments, or do you automatically receive them?
- Financial concerns are more pronounced. Poverty has become more entrenched, the result of greater housing issues and costs along with benefit worries particularly the recent Universal Credit (UC) cut. Although recent UK Government changes to UC has alleviated some financial pressure for those in work, many of our single parents who are not currently in employment, have not benefitted.

“ What benefits can I claim? ”

“ Can you please check that I am getting everything I am eligible to claim? I am working full time but don't qualify for things other single parents seem to get, presumably because of my income. What if I reduced my hours, would that make a difference? ”





3. Money and Family Income

- The rising cost of living makes for hard choices. In particular at this time of year, parents are worried about the prospect of Christmas and not being able to afford presents for their children.
- Rising energy costs are inevitably having a knock-on effect on all aspects of family life. This is a financial crisis for many with no end in sight.

“I work part-time and have five children and I am really struggling financially. I am at breaking point.”

“We have no money for food, fuel or clothes for the children. I am really struggling.”

“Can you help me with Christmas?”

“I’m worried about the cost of Christmas can you help me with this?”





“What will happen if I cannot afford my gas and electricity? I am anxious every day about money. I never imagined I would end up like this with very little money. I feel guilty as a parent that my children will feel different as not many toys at Christmas.”

“I am struggling financially. Can you help with food or grants?”

“I am looking for childcare but need help paying for it.”

“Can you pay for upfront childcare costs?”





4. Family Wellbeing

- Domestic abuse and coercive control remain prominent themes. Parents and children are suffering, and in some cases, from years of abuse and trauma. Parents are desperately seeking advice, support, and respite from OPFS services.

Mum and child have PTSD after suffering through years of domestic violence and the other child is attending CAMHs. Where can she get respite?

I am recently separated but we jointly own the property. What are my housing rights if my husband will not move out of the property?





5. Separating / Being a Single Parent

Child - Sole Care responsibilities

- As noted above, parents are anxious about how they will pay for Christmas. They are asking for help towards buying and paying for presents for their children.
- For some parents the process of separation has been really challenging and they are left feeling overwhelmed and unsure how to move forward.
- Families continue to require additional support from our services. This is especially true where the individual has just become a parent for the first time and needs help to access the right advice.
- Parents tell us they do not receive adequate childcare support with things like,
 - after school care
 - childcare costs or
 - extra assistance for their child with additional support needs for example, children with autism and those with communication difficulties.

“ I need help with family law, housing, benefits, contact with the other parent etc. I really need someone to guide me through all of this. It is so stressful. I am not sleeping and feeling tired all the time. ”

“ What can I claim when my baby is born, I am not sure about working full time in the future what are my options. ”

“ What family support do you offer single parents? ”



...My son is being bullied at school as kids are saying he is different as his Dad left when he was born, and we do not see him at all...

Parent looking for afterschool service in Fife for her son with communication difficulties.

I am a working single parent with a five-year-old twins and expensive childcare. Am I getting everything I am, entitled to? My ex-partner is not working so I am not getting child maintenance and I have never claimed help with rent but if I do now, I will be moved to Universal Credit.

My ex-partner has gone back to stay in the USA, and I am 35 weeks pregnant I am not sure whether to put his name on the birth certificate what are the legal implications of this.

I am separating from my husband but living in the same house till January. I have another property to go to so will not have to pay rent or a mortgage. We have a two- and four-year-old what benefits could I claim, I am not sure?

Parent was extremely distressed as her son with Autism has been verbally abusive towards her out in public. How can she get support for this and are there any groups she can meet other parents in the same situation?

What kind of maternity benefits are there and where can I apply for them?



6. Work / Education and Training

- Parents continue to report concerns over their working arrangements. They often have challenges balancing education responsibilities because of limited income and highlight how changes in their financial circumstance can affect these roles.

“ I’m thinking of starting work for 10 hours each week. I get carer’s allowance. How will this be affected, and will I get Universal Credit too? ”

“ There have been changes to my working hours and I am worried how this will affect my Universal Credit payment. ”

“ I work full time and I have five children from 6-15 years old. I am struggling with school lunches and school uniforms as I have no help with this because of my income. Is there any help out there? ”

“ My daughter is starting an HNC. Does my Child Benefit stop? ”





7. Children

Poverty and isolation have an impact on parent's and children's wellbeing, causing stress, anxiety, and poor mental health. The challenge of being both sole carer and breadwinner has been magnified by the impact of the present COVID-19 crisis. We know from research by Caledonian University that 84% of single parents reported being lonely before lockdown. Isolation, loneliness, and poverty have a significant impact on mental health - causing anxiety, low mood, and depression.¹

Research also tells us that when the UK went into hard lockdown in March 2020, these mechanisms for navigating life on a low income suddenly became very difficult, if not impossible, to sustain.² For example, the restrictions on household mixing and non-essential trips removed the opportunities for direct family and community support, while much local authority provision was disrupted. Parents and carers on a low income highlighted factors that impacted on family wellbeing since the pandemic began.

- Having children at home meant higher spending on food, energy and on ways to entertain or distract children when so many outdoor leisure activities were no longer an option.
- Remote schooling in particular has been very expensive for families that have had to buy a laptop, for example, or arrange for broadband access. Others just couldn't afford it so some children suffered the impact on their education as a result.
- The cost of certain items (most obviously food) has risen for many: promotions have been reduced and cheaper items are harder to obtain. Many families were forced to use more local but expensive stores to avoid public transport or to get groceries delivered, while charity shops have been harder to access.

1 <https://www.opfs.org.uk/policy-doc/community-connections-briefing-papers/>

2 M Power, R Patrick, K Garthwaite & G Page, COVID realities - everyday life for families on a low income during the pandemic, July 2020



- Restrictions on household mixing and non-essential trips constrained family and community support, while vital free services such as libraries were often closed over the period of lockdown and while restrictions were in place.
- Single parents unique situation was often not recognised for example we heard from parents who were turned away from supermarkets because they were accompanied by their children.
- Single parent families were often not included in the groups which were identified as being at risk by local authorities during lockdown, even though they were uniquely affected by being trapped at home with their children.
- Parents continue to seek help with setting up and organising child contact arrangements for their children with their ex-partners.
- Parents also highlight difficulty with accessing Child Maintenance Services and are looking for solutions to this problem.

“Where do I get help to apply to the Independent Case Examiner about the Child Maintenance Service and their handling of my case?”

“My ex-partner is self-employed and earns a lot of money. and gives me very little. How do I put in a Variation (for child maintenance)?”

“I need help with my child maintenance arrangements.”



Spotlight: UC and Rising Energy Costs

Since the pandemic started, the financial crisis characterised by income losses, job insecurity and the ending of the furlough scheme have all contributed to higher poverty levels. Consequently, we have noted that Universal Credit has come under greater scrutiny.

Since September 2021 there has been about 5.2 million³ people claiming UC, and this is a marked increase compared to pre-COVID-19 levels. However, as of October of this year, the UK Government has cut UC for those out of work and the prospect of rising energy bills and food costs has left many fearing what the coming winter period will bring.

Despite widespread condemnation, from October 2021, UC was reduced by £20-a-week. This was the result of the UK Government doing away with the 'uplift' to payments that had been put in place since April 2020 to help with costs during the pandemic. Many UC claimants are women and a high percentage of whom will be single parents. Consequently, the impact of the government welfare changes will inevitably fall disproportionately on them.

We do acknowledge that changes to UC announced in the November Budget (increase in work allowance and the taper rate decrease from 63% to 55%) will leave 1.3 million families better off than before the withdrawal of the £20 a week boost to UC and make 330,000 more families eligible for support. However, 3.6 million families will remain worse off.⁴ Many of the latter will be single parent households.

Research⁵ conducted in October by the Resolution Foundation highlighted the growing financial pressures from rising costs on family income. They noted,

3 <https://www.bigissue.com/news/social-justice/universal-credit-what-is-it-and-why-does-the-20-increase-matter/>

4 <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/press-releases/budget-benefit-boost-extends-universal-credit-support-to-families-on-up-to-37700-but-poverty-levels-will-rise-by-120000/>

5 <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/bills-bills-bills/>



“The impacts of soaring global gas markets on the energy bills of millions of families are already clear to see, with the price cap rising by 12 per cent on 1 October, the highest amount since the policy began... forecast is that next April bills will be more than £1,650 per household, a near-50 per cent rise on average bills in 2020.”⁶

These financial increases are continually and disproportionately affecting low income and single parent family households. The gap between the poorest and wealthiest families continues to widen. If the cost of living continues to rise at such an alarming rate, then as the Resolution Foundation worryingly predicts, “It would see gas and electricity spend account for more than a tenth of the budgets of the least well-off families.”⁷

Similarly, the Executive Director of Citizens Advice has noted that current price hikes,

“could lead to a perfect storm for families this autumn, hitting people at the same time as a Universal Credit cut and the end of furlough. It’s particularly worrying given families on Universal Credit are far more likely to already be in energy debt...With bills rising and incomes falling, many families will find it hard to escape. For many, debt will be the inevitable consequence.”⁸

At a recent Scottish Parliamentary Social Justice and Social Security consultation session on poverty and debt, one 25-year-old mother’s reported experience reflected the challenges of UC that many single parents are currently facing. The cut has meant that she is penalised further as she receives less money than somebody over the age of 25. She is facing an £80 benefit cut overall. This is leading to more stress and worry. In addition, she has had to take out a loan to pay back an advanced payment for UC and she is expecting to have to pay more over a shorter period for Council Tax.

In OPFS’s view, there is a clear need to reverse the draconian cuts to UC and abolish the benefit cap and two child policy to ensure that single parent families keep afloat financially.

6 <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/bills-bills-bills/>

7 <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/bills-bills-bills/>

8 <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/about-us1/media/press-releases/universal-credit-cut-will-leave-15-million-workers-in-hardship-warns-citizens-advice/>



Observation

The October/November COVID-19 impact report finds that single parents' current worries revolve around the rising cost of living. With Christmas imminent and the financial burden this will bring for single parents, a bleak winter is in prospect. The £20 cut to Universal Credit will disadvantage many of its recipients. The risk of homelessness, increased use of foodbanks and rising fuel poverty are potential outcomes for our poorest communities.

Surely this should not be contemplated in a Western society or any society for that matter.

The vulnerable in our communities should be the priority for Local and National Governments. However, at times this is not evident. It seems that the community spirit that was actively advocated and proclaimed during the height of the pandemic has waned since. The need to promote a more fair and equal society requires renewed attention and Governmental commitment, backed up by appropriate policies which lead to positive action. People's lived experience, characterised by poverty and changes to the welfare system, needs to inform relevant policymaking. This will lead to a more just society which gives dignity and respect to all its citizens and not solely the few.



One Parent Families Scotland

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