



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty

COVID-19

Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring Report



Issue 16 - January / February 2022



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. Seperating / Being a Single Parent**
- 6. Work / Education and Training**
- 7. Children**

The report describes any emerging themes within these categories.





1. Health and Wellbeing

- Parents feel anxious, depressed, and isolated, exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis and further impending price hikes in food, fuel, and heating/electricity. These increasing concerns impacts all aspects of day to day living and consequently reinforces poor mental health and wellbeing:

I have severe depression and anxiety. Where can I get to deal with this?

Parent looking for groups to join in the Edinburgh area as she is feeling overwhelmed and feels if she met with other single parents that would help. Where can she get help with this?

Parent has been called for her first appointment with her work coach and feeling worried, anxious and wanting to know what will happen at this appointment. Where can she get help with her anxiety?

I feel I am depressed, anxious all the time and my children are suffering because of this. Can you help me please?





2. Social Security Benefits

- Parents remain concerned about their benefits.

“ My son is 16 - what happens to my Tax Credits and housing benefit now? ”

“ Can I get help with my better off calculations? ”

“ I am starting a new job. What help is available with benefits? ”





3. Money and Family Income

- As noted above, parents are worried about the ever-rising cost of living and being able to put food on the table or have enough money to heat their homes and pay the bills.
- Bridging payments – many parents are getting in touch to check if they are eligible to receive this payment.
- Some parents are applying for all available energy grants.
- Other parents are looking for financial support to help them undertake online courses at college.
- Some parents are needing support to deal with debt i.e., credit cards, loans, other debts/expenses –

I really need support with this as soon as possible. Where can I get help?

**The cost of living has affected me by me having to sometimes turn off the heating even when it's really cold to ensure we have enough electric to do until I next get paid.
I even sometimes have to put items into cash convertors on buyback to buy more electric.**





“ You get fed up having to buy the cheapest food for your family, but I have no choice as anything left goes toward my heating. Receiving food parcels has saved the day for me at times I try to keep the heating off when the kids are at school. ”

“ I feel drained and exhausted over the constant worry over having enough money to pay for everything. Where can I get help with this for the future? ”

“ Where can I get help with a food voucher? I am desperate. ”

“ Are crisis grants still available? ”

“ This affects me every month I find it hard to put gas and electric in and with the colder weather it's a lot harder. ”

“ I need a winter coat and warm clothing for the children. Where can I go for this? ”





4. Family Wellbeing

- Domestic abuse is a consistently worrying problem for family relationships.

I am very worried about my young son who witnessed the violence. In the past his behaviour has been badly affected by this. Where can I get support?

Parent is desperate to leave an abusive partner and wanting to know what housing she will receive with her three small children. She has put up with this abuse for years and is now at breaking point. What support can she receive?





5. Separating / Being a Single Parent

Child - Sole Care responsibilities

- Parents have many different concerns in relation to sole care responsibilities. These include, coping with a child's medical condition diagnosis, legal issues, and costs, coping with loss and bereavement:

“ My son has autism, and I am finding this very stressful as we have no friends or family nearby. Where can I get support to deal with this condition? ”

“ Separation – I need complex legal advice. Where can I go for help with this? ”

“ Can I move to another part of the UK with my young son even if my ex-partner does not want this to happen? ”

“ My ex-partner has not seen the kids in years and has now turned up and the kids do not want to see him. Where do I stand legally? ”





6. Work / Education and Training

- It is evident that increases in the cost of living is the most significant issue for people just now. It is not just directly related to what is happening with food, fuel, and energy costs. These increases are also having a knock-on effect in the areas of education, work, and training, leading to difficult choices for single parents:

“

I have just finished my degree course and I am a single parent. I have a lot of debt and loans. Where can I get financial help?

”

“

I am working part time and want to change to a different full-time job. What help can I get with childcare costs through Universal Credit?

”





7. Children

- Child contact continues to be a problem for many families who are reluctant to stay in contact with abusive fathers.
- Chasing up payment arrears for child maintenance, dealing with appeals and experiences of inconsistent child maintenance services are regular themes raised:

“ Child contact stopped due to court order. How do I explain this to my child? ”

“ My child is 17 and has now left education. Do I still have to pay for child maintenance? ”

“ Do you still pay child maintenance when your child is 16? ”

“ How do I find out about a child maintenance variation? ”





The Cost-of-living Crisis

We know from our work with single parents that daily life is becoming more and more unsustainable.

The rising cost of living is having a disproportionately negative impact on the most vulnerable in our society, those living on the lowest incomes. Single parent families have not yet overcome the financial fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and are constantly firefighting on all fronts. The proposed hikes in bills expected in April 2022 will only lead to increased risk of homelessness, destitution, greater reliance on foodbanks and even more difficult choices. If this was not bad enough, the recent sanctions on Russia, due to the invasion of Ukraine will have wider consequences for people across the world and further entrench the cycle of poverty for many on low incomes.

“ I feel I am out there working for nothing, thank God for food parcels which allows me more money for my gas and electric. I don't know how I will manage when it goes up in April and I'm worried sick. ”

“ It's a struggle to get by... the money doesn't stretch far enough with the increase of everything food or heating is a choice I face sometimes. ”

“ One of my neighbours has had to move as she couldn't afford to run the storage heaters and has a new baby, it's a nightmare. I'm glad my son is at nursery for most of the day as I can't afford to keep the place warm for him. ”

“ I think it's going to make a lot of single parents struggle to keep putting money in the meters as even £10 isn't lasting a week, I've went through £20 in a whole week I can't afford to keep the heating on all the time. ”



The following is a case study from our Advice & Information team, providing a snapshot of one parent's financial challenges and our response. This example reflects the general needs of single parents and reinforces the need for improved interventions going forward by local and national governments, and stakeholders such as OPFS if we are to mitigate the ever-increasing financial tsunami hitting families.

OPFS Advice & Information Service Case Study

Female Single Parent caller to OPFS Lone Parent Helpline

A single mother with four children called the helpline in December 2021. She was struggling with the cost of everyday basics, such as food and energy, but that this was made worse by the pressure of Christmas. The parent also stated that this was making her feel low and depressed. As she had no support nearby, she felt that she had not been able to discuss any of this with anyone else and felt she had no means of getting into a better position.

Advice Given

The advisor suggested that she could apply for our in-house Winter Payment grant to ease some pressure on finances. The advisor took parent's details and completed a welfare check over the phone to ensure that parent was receiving all the correct benefits and entitlements. The advisor also gave parent the information and contact details of Money Advice to help with debt. The advisor also spoke to the parent about her mental health and wellbeing and suggested that she contact the GP for further help. She also provided her with the phone number for Breathing Space. During further conversation with the parent, the advisor identified that isolation was particularly upsetting for the parent and that she had no supports around her. The advisor spoke to the parent about ways to meet others and decrease isolation, including giving information about the benefits of volunteering. The parent was also looking for information about getting back to work and the advisor again suggested volunteering as a way of building skills and confidence, as well as the information of employability services.



Interventions Used

- Listening Ear & Emotional Support
- In-House Grant Application
- Benefits check and Welfare calculation
- Information given about Breathing Space, Money Advice, employability services, and benefits of volunteering.

Feedback Received from Parent

The parent called back on Christmas Eve to thank OPFS for the financial help and for the support she was given as she was feeling a bit better about her situation. She has managed to use the grant to put some energy on and buy some Christmas dinner for the family which she didn't think she would have been able to do. Having been able to speak to someone on the helpline reduced her loneliness and increased her knowledge of how to help herself and her family.

The case study above details how daily life is a challenge on an increasingly low family budget and the negative impact this is having on the family's mental health and wellbeing. It also demonstrates the importance of organisations like OPFS being available in supporting parents to navigate the day-to-day struggles on a low income.





Recent research from The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)¹ highlights the impact which the increased financial costs due in April will have on those who are already struggling, despite the new measures from the UK Government on the deferral scheme for energy bills and council tax discounts:

- Low-income families will spend on average 16% of their incomes after housing costs on energy bills
- Single adult households on low incomes will spend a shocking 43% average of their income after housing costs on energy bills
- Some families on low incomes will face annual bills as high as £2,326 from April 2022
- For low-income families with children, the measures will mitigate just 36% of the increase in their bills on average. This compares to 59% for low-income single adult households.²

Senior Economist, Rebecca Mc Donald at JRF notes the following:

“We are on the brink of colliding with the 7% inflation rate forecast for April by the Bank of England. Millions of low-income families will rightly worry this further drives up their living costs and drags down their living standards.

... the poorly targeted method chosen by the Chancellor for his recent support package fell short of delivering what low-income families will need to afford the essentials. This risks creating a ‘debt now, more debt later’ approach for the families already struggling the most.”³

1 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/new-measures-wont-protect-poorest-families-new-energy-price-cap>

2 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/new-measures-wont-protect-poorest-families-new-energy-price-cap>

3 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/inflation-leaves-low-income-families-grappling-impossible-choices>



Response to the cost-of-living crisis

As an organisation which supports and campaigns with single parent families, we will argue for policies to mitigate the negative impacts of current and future increases in the cost of living. Through our work on welfare rights, debt advice and support for families we aim to respond in every way we can to what is a cost-of-living catastrophe.

- Families' budgets were already at breaking point before prices began to soar. Low wages, years of benefit cuts and freezes, policies like the benefit cap, 2-child policy and a pandemic that has hit those with least most, means there is a huge mismatch between what families have and what they need to get by.
- Cost to benefits. The rising cost of essentials like energy and food is making things worse for families, and the support isn't keeping pace. Benefits are set to go up by only 3.1 per cent in April, but inflation will hit 7.25 per cent. And this will be the second cut to benefits in six months, following the £20 a week cut to universal credit.
- This will be devastating for families. No child should have to worry about money and how their parents will afford bills. Children are coming home from school to cold houses, and rising prices will only make this worse. Parents are already skipping meals to put food on the table for their children. Families have nothing left to cut back on.
- There is no sign of the pressure on families easing and the government measures don't go far enough. The cost of essentials is rising at the fastest rate in 30 years. Families in poverty with children face extra energy costs of £36 a month despite the steps the government has taken. For these families, food will also go up by £26 a month compared to last year. Energy bills are already predicted to go up again in October. Many families are likely to face next winter in an even worse position than today.

In line with many other charities OPFS calls upon the UK government to increase all benefits by at least 7 per cent in April to match inflation. This alone won't fix the problem, but it will prevent it from getting significantly worse. Much more is needed for the level of support to reflect what families need to get by – but increasing benefits in April to match inflation must be the first step.



One Parent Families Scotland

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