

A photograph of a woman with her eyes closed, hugging a young child from behind. The woman is wearing a red top, and the child is wearing a grey hoodie. The background is a bright, outdoor setting with trees and sunlight. The text is overlaid on the image in white.

Single Parent Families Impact Report

Issue 18
Cost of the School Holidays
July 2022



**One Parent
Families Scotland**
changing lives, challenging poverty

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Introduction

OPFS has developed a model to regularly collect the experiences of single parents across Scotland. Through our five local services, national advice and information service and website we capture key areas of concern for single parent's families.

Our bi-monthly monitoring reports have captured the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of single parent families. The report now also focusses on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis including rising energy costs and food bills. However, we will still recognise COVID-19 related issues which continue to impact on single parent families.

There are five elements to the model:

- Gathering knowledge: Parent's 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.

Main findings

Health and Wellbeing

All families are experiencing increasing financial pressures, our research finds that low-income single parent families are often experiencing grinding poverty. The pandemic's impact has not been carried equally across society. We know that women who are single parents have been particularly hard hit by the current economic tsunami and this has led to a rising tide of family hardship.

Feedback during the months of June and July describe parents making constant sacrifices to ensure that their children's basic needs are met. In some cases, mothers are struggling to pay bills, heat their homes and feed their children. Isolation, anxiety, and depression are common themes emerging,



It (the cost-of-living crisis) is having an awful impact on me. I have been low. My daily life is affected because I am struggling to stay strong for my son. I need to feel mentally well to deal with other battles that we have going on.



I am stressed about making it through to the end of the month and worrying about my child's mental health and emotional well-being.

Social Security Benefits

Many single parents are finding that the social security benefits they receive are insufficient to make ends meet and cover basic needs.



It is not enough; I have two girls that are almost five still wearing nappies... so the money I receive is not enough for the cost of living.



Cost of shopping is awful and energy prices are terrible... doubled for me for what I paid in 2020. Yet any wage rise I get then I lose benefits so never ever getting out of it. Just buried deeper by the system.

Austerity-driven cuts to benefits such as the benefit cap and the two-child policy have left single parents among the most exposed to soaring inflation. The impact of cuts to state support has also left many women raising their children alone in a much weaker position to cope with the shocks of the pandemic and rising prices of basics such as food and heating.¹

Money and family income

Parents continue to tell us that they are dependent on food banks and are struggling to make ends meet with rising energy costs. OPFS gave evidence to a recent Scottish Parliament Social Justice and Social Security Committee inquiry into debt and low income.² We have found that too many families are living in a constant cycle of entrenched poverty. We share the concerns that current inflation rates will result in even greater debt now and in the future.



I don't have enough money to live on each month. I work and I still struggle to survive... I'm worried about the inflation in food fuel etc and if we will be able to make ends meet.



Food shopping so expensive. I don't know how to make it cheaper. Already buying cheapest possible...difficulty paying petrol to take kids to school or travel to work...

¹ [Pre-pandemic relative poverty rate for children of lone parents - IFS](#)

² Social Justice and Social Security Committee. 2022. Robbing Peter to pay Paul: Low income and the debt trap. [Robbing Peter to pay Paul: Low income and the debt trap \(azureedge.net\)](#)

Family wellbeing

Many parents describe domestic abuse in all its forms as a recurring issue. This shows no sign of abating. For instance, withheld child maintenance is a form of economic abuse by the paying parent, using manipulation and abuse of power to continue the cycle of control.



...the absent parent couldn't pay for 12 years when it is clear he is working and earning due to his activities and spending habits.



My ex-partner is a businessman and lives in luxury whilst his daughter sits with no heating and isolated due to me unable to afford treats and days out.

We know from organisations such as Women's Aid, that domestic violence has risen markedly in the UK during the COVID-19 lockdown and beyond³. This was also reflected in parent feedback during the period of June and July:



I must go without so that my children don't. It's not a choice I make it's the life that has been forced upon me by standing up to and leaving a domestic abuser.



I have finally decided that I am going to leave my abusive partner. He is very angry about this and saying he will not allow this.

3 Women's Aid, 2021. Shadow Pandemic – Shining a Light on Domestic Abuse During Covid. Available online at, https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Shadow_Pandemic_Report_FINAL.pdf

Separating / being a single parent

Children - Sole care responsibilities

Childcare remains the predominant issue for families in terms of availability, flexibility and finding appropriate wrap around services. Too many parents are faced with having expensive or limited childcare that lacks flexibility. This in turn adversely impacts on employment opportunities and wellbeing.



Where can I find emergency childcare while I appear as a witness against my ex-partner? I have three small children.



Affordable childcare would allow me to look for a better job.

The cost-of-living crisis is parents' immediate concern: how they will provide for and raise their children.



I am overwhelmed, where do I start. I have no idea about Child Maintenance, Housing, benefits etc. I have not been sleeping and feeling ill about the future with my kids.

Work / education and training

Over the last two months the issues of work, education and training were not major priorities for parents which reflects their day-to-day struggles to just survive. Some were in touch for advice because they lost their job.



My job came to a sudden end last week due to bankruptcy. I have had no pay and my employer is out of the country. What can I do, I do not know anything about employment law, I am very worried about money now?

Any changes in people's financial situation, particularly with the current cost of living crisis, will have a significant impact on their work, education, and training.

Children

Over the period of June and July, parents noted the problems of navigating the challenging period of the summer school holidays. They wanted to do activities with their children but with a very tight budget they struggled to achieve this. They often felt that they were not financially able to offer what other parents could and were letting their children down.



When they are off, they like to go places and do things which is hard to save for which is what I have to try and do for times like summer holidays, for a day here and there as I can't afford time away as it costs too much.



The rising cost of everything - will I be able to save money aside for the school holidays or will I need to use it to cover all the bills.



Lots of parents are upset as they have no spare money at all for over the summer to take children out for trips. Some parents feel like they are failures due to the severe poverty that they are living in.

Helpline Adviser

Spotlighted topic: Cost of the school holidays

The following parents experience illustrates the difficulty of looking after children during the summer holidays on a low income, and OPFS's response to this.

Sarah

Our Advice & Information service received a 'cost of living' enquiry from a single parent who called the Lone Parent Helpline. The parent was really upset as she had no extra money to take her four children on any day trips or outings during the school summer holidays. This parent was also in debt with energy costs, loans, and credit card/credit union loan. The parent had not been sleeping and was feeling anxious and overwhelmed. She received very little child maintenance from her ex-partner. The parent felt she had failed in her duties because her children could not have treats or days out.

Advice given

The parent was given advice about benefits and a benefit calculation to check that she was receiving all her entitlements. She was referred to the Advice Shop in Edinburgh for money and debt advice. The parent was also referred to OPFS Edinburgh Service which often organises days trips or activities which run during the school holidays. This would also connect her to other groups of parents, so she was not so isolated.

Intervention included

- Benefit check
- A 'listening ear' offering emotional & wellbeing support
- Advice Shop Edinburgh
- OPFS website Wellbeing Section My Life and Me, and Edinburgh Service
- Breathing Space
- Home Energy Scotland.
- GP referral for help with sleeping issues.
- Child Maintenance Options.
- An OPFS Wellbeing box was sent out to the parent.

Recommended actions

Single Parents need access to quality, affordable, flexible holiday childcare for school age children. This allows parents to work or study and gives children the chance to socialise and have fun with other children, especially for low-income families.

Working single parents, unlike couples, do not have enough annual leave to cover the 13 weeks of school holidays across the year. With record levels of inflation and cost of living pressures, it is more important than ever that the importance of holiday childcare is recognized. It is a social and economic resource, supporting employers with a reliable workforce and ensuring children are safe, well fed and taking part in positive and fun activities during the break from school.

- The UK Government should reform Universal Credit, so it better supports parent into work - by increasing the maximum amount of childcare costs paid under Universal Credit and guaranteeing support for upfront childcare costs.
- Scottish Government should expand provision of free Holiday Activities and Food programmes to improve access to affordable, high-quality childcare for all children who require it.
- Local authorities should ensure they have a comprehensive overview of the cost and availability of holiday childcare in their area to identify and plug gaps in provision. They should provide good quality holiday childcare information and broker access to local provision that meets families' needs.

Conclusion

During June and July when schools were closed, parents have been looking after and entertaining their children for longer periods of time at home. As we have seen, parents are faced with even harder choices during the summer months. They have additional pressures placed on their financial and emotional resources.

OPFS will continue to come up with creative ways to support and assist families. We will continue to push for joined up policy coherence across both Scottish and UK Government cost-of-living strategies. We will also work with our partners and other third sector organisations to deliver outcome focussed strategies to help improve family wellbeing.



One Parent Families Scotland

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