



Living without a lifeline.

Single parenting and the cost of living crisis.

2022

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Foreword

A core part of One Parent Families Scotland's (OPFS) mission is calling for an end to the stigma and judgemental attitudes single parent families face and for policies which ensure that they achieve their potential and are protected from poverty. Often the justification for policies which cause hardship is one which puts the responsibility, and often blame, solely in the hands of the individual. Evidence tells us that it is structural factors which determine the vulnerability of individuals and families to poverty.

Single parents are unique in combining the role of sole carer and breadwinner for their children – not being able to pool your resources with another adult comes with risks of real hardship. Public policy must do more to understand the practicalities of single parenting.

When services and policy priorities are co-produced, they work better because they make the most of the shared expertise of the practitioners who work for OPFS and the parents who are experts through experience. We recognise the diversity of single parents and as part of this embrace an intersectional gender, equalities, and human rights approach.

OPFS is working towards involving single parents in every part of the work that we do. As a contribution to this strategic goal, OPFS issued a wide-ranging consultation to ask single parents about the day-to-day issues that affect their lives, what they think governments should do to support their families and what OPFS should prioritise in our service delivery.

This resultant report describes the grinding poverty faced by many single parent families and indicates that the pandemic's impact has not been borne equally. Women who are single parents have been particularly hard hit by the economic storm that has engulfed us and, with women's poverty being inextricably linked to child poverty, we are living amid a rising tide of family hardship.

Single parents described the day-to-day struggle to afford food and fuel, and the need to make sacrifices to ensure that children's basic needs were met. In some cases, mothers go without food and struggle to pay essential bills. Isolation, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts were described.

The parents responding have also forcefully described the policy areas which must be prioritised by government to tackle poverty and support family wellbeing and the priority areas where we at OPFS need to focus our energies. Over the coming year, these priorities will be our priorities.

Satwat Rehman CEO

One Parent Families Scotland

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the single parents who took part in our consultation. They gave of their time generously and enthusiastically. The insights and descriptions of the challenges they face paint a picture of their daily struggles and the sacrifices they make for their children. We appreciate that it was often difficult for parents to share these experiences and we value their contributions. These insights have helped to enrich the analysis of this report.

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

One Parent Families Scotland: aims and mission

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) is the leading charity working with single parent families in Scotland. Building on over seventy years of advocacy and service-delivery expertise, OPFS provides expert information, advice, and family support for one parent families, along with training activities, employability programmes and flexible childcare. OPFS campaigns with parents to make their voices heard to change the systems, policies and attitudes that disadvantage single parent families.

Single parent families are a diverse group, so we believe policy makers need to adopt an intersectional gender, equalities, and human rights lens to ensure what is developed will be inclusive of experiences of single parents experiencing multiple inequalities and poverty.

We want to see a Scotland where single parent families, in all their diversity, will thrive and are treated equally and fairly. OPFS's mission is to support single parents to achieve their potential, ensure their role as sole carer and breadwinner is recognised, and together challenge stigma, discrimination, and poverty.

Purpose of the research

This research sought to find out more about the experiences and priorities of single parent families in Scotland by asking single parents about any concerns or issues they were facing across various aspects of their lives.

The survey and focus groups which formed the research focused on a selection of themes which were most commonly being raised by single parents through One Parent Families Scotland's five local services and national Lone Parent Helpline: the cost of living, family finances, social security, childcare (early years and school age), employment and/or Further/Higher Education, mental health and wellbeing, and Covid-19.

Importantly, we also wanted to identify possible solutions to challenges being faced by single parent families, and with this in mind we asked parents how they believe improvements could be made.

The findings of this research and the proposals for policy change put forward by single parents themselves have been used to produce a series of recommendations for the UK, Scottish and local governments.

Internally, OPFS will also use what parents have told us in the development of our services and our campaigns in the coming year.

Policy context

There are 144,000 single parent families in Scotland, 25% of all families with dependent children. A recent briefing from Public Health Scotland shows: ¹

- Single parent families make up 25% of all families, and 92% are headed by women. Around 80% of single parents are aged between 25 and 50 years old and less than 1% are under 20.²
- Most (65%) single parents with dependent children in Scotland are in paid employment.
- Four in ten (90,000) children in poverty in Scotland live in a single parent family and 39% of children in single parent families live in poverty.
- Two thirds of children in poverty in single parent families (66%) live in families where no one is in paid employment. A quarter (23%) live in families where the parent works part-time.
- Families often belong to more than one of the priority groups in the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan. For example, 40% of children in single parent families also have a disabled person at home, and 47% of children in a family with a mother aged under 25 are also in a single parent household.

Viewing single parents through an intersectional lens highlights multiple factors of disadvantage facing women who are single parents. Not all single mothers share the same level of disadvantage: single mothers from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities, for example, experience the discrimination and inequality that confronts them as women, but in addition they must deal with those that come with being women of colour.

During the Covid-19 lockdown and the restrictions that followed, the fast-paced policy making environment highlighted how single parents are consistently overlooked by policymakers, employers, and businesses.

Most single parents are women who have sole care of their children, almost one in five cares for at least one child with a disability, and many work in the care sector. For many, that results in personal and economic costs, including desperate poverty. A new national focus on care, care workers, and unpaid carers is urgently required to ensure Scotland is a caring country.³

A recent survey of 1083 single parents across the UK by the Single Parent Rights campaign found that 80% experienced discrimination. The same survey showed that 96% wanted single parents added as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010 which prohibits discrimination towards certain groups on the basis of 'protected characteristics'.⁴

An Ipsos 'Omnibus Survey of Scottish Parents' in December 2021 showed that single parents have experienced much greater financial hardship than couples with children. It found that 58% of single parents found it more difficult to afford their bills in the last year, 60% had experienced reductions in the amount of money they are able to put aside or save for the future, and 52% had reductions in the level of benefits received.⁵

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) shows that single parents were more likely to

¹ [Child Poverty in Scotland: priority groups - lone-parent families \(publichealthscotland.scot\)](https://publichealthscotland.scot)

² [Gingerbread: Single parent facts and figures.](#)

³ <http://uwsoxfampartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NPF-Report.pdf>

⁴ [Single Parent Discrimination Research & Lobbying — Single Parent Rights](#)

⁵ [ipsos-omnibus-survey-of-scottish-parents-financial-pressures-facing-lone-parents/](#)

be food insecure amid the cost of living increases – with as many as 70% going hungry and skipping meals compared with 55% for couple parents.⁶

The reason for this is that single parent households have the lowest equivalised household incomes in the UK – 39% less than the median household income. In term of savings, they have a ‘dis-saving’ rate of minus 15% compared to a savings rate of 17% for two parents with children. So, for single parents, financial resilience is in short supply – “they are struggling financially from day to day”.⁷

Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) says that a decade of austerity-driven cuts to benefits has left single parents among the most exposed to soaring inflation. Cuts to state support by successive Conservative governments have left 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.⁸

The IFS says the rise in poverty for children living in single parent households reflects reductions in the real value of state benefits in the years from 2011 to 2019. Among the cuts in support that have most affected single mothers are the benefit cap, the four-year freeze in benefits between 2016 and 2020, the two-child limit and a lowering of the age of the youngest child when single parents must start looking for work. (Single parents are now expected to prepare for work when their youngest reaches one, and then be in a job from the age of three. Single parents don’t have the security to build what is required to search for work until they get their children into school or proper childcare).

Barriers to employment include a lack of recent work experience, the shortage of family-friendly, fairly paid working options and the lack of affordable, flexible early years and school-age childcare. Some single parents or their child are disabled or have poor health, and some choose not to work while their child is very young.

The dramatic increase in the cost of living and the economic impact of the pandemic means parents are struggling even more with rising childcare costs and a drop in the availability of places. The pandemic has brought a wider awareness of the importance of early years and school age childcare to both parents and children – and especially the key role it plays in helping to narrow the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. But sadly, once again, we find that too many families are struggling to find and afford the childcare they need.

All three- and four-year-olds in Scotland can access 1140 hours of funded childcare per year. This equates to 30 hours a week during term-time, or about 22 hours if spread across the year. However, for a full-time place in a nursery for a child under three years (50 hours a week) in Scotland, families are paying on average £212 per week. The average price of a part time childcare place (25 hours a week) for a child aged under two in a nursery is £108.62 in Scotland.

⁶ [Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(2022\). Not heating, eating or meeting bills: managing a cost of living crisis on a low income.](#)

⁷ [After-shocks.pdf \(resolutionfoundation.org\)](#)

⁸ [Pre-pandemic relative poverty rate for children of lone parents IFS](#)

The average weekly price for families using an after-school club for five days per week in Scotland is £66.75 per week, or £2,603 a year during term time (39 weeks).⁹ The cost of holiday childcare is more than £140 a week.¹⁰

Our research with JRF¹¹ and Oxfam Scotland¹² shows that along with the need for quality, affordable, accessible, flexible early years and school-age childcare, support for parents in the transition into paid work is vital. The findings showed Scotland's labour market is not working for single parents; Scotland is missing out on single parents' economic contributions and skills, and single parents are missing out on opportunities they deserve to build a better life for themselves and their families.

Between 2003 and 2020 the risk of living in very deep poverty (less than 40% of median income after housing costs) has increased by a third for single parent families, to reach 19%¹³. For single parents, not being able to pool resources with another adult comes with risks of real hardship. Single parents make up 22% of homeless applications in Scotland, and nearly half of all homeless applications in 2020-2021 were due to relationship breakdown or being asked to leave¹⁴.

The Scottish Government has published its second Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, due under the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, outlining action for the period 2022-26.¹⁵ We are very supportive of many of the measures detailed in the child poverty delivery plan, although we know more actions will be needed over the coming years. Our response is included in the policy recommendations section of this report.

We fundamentally disagree with claims that the root causes of poverty are attributable to personal behaviour - family breakdown, problem debt, or drug and alcohol use - rather than to structural economic factors. A range of circumstances including rising living costs, low pay, lack of paid work, inadequate social security benefits and women's inequality together mean some people do not have enough resources.¹⁶

The growing gap between the richest and poorest in the UK is directly linked to higher rates of poverty.¹⁷ Women living in poverty, single mothers, and essential workers as well as those belonging to minority racial and ethnic groups have been pushed furthest to the margins during the pandemic.¹⁸

Oxfam's latest report – Profiting from Pain – shows that, since 2020, every 30 hours a new billionaire is created. In those same hours, a million people are expected to be pushed into extreme poverty in 2022.¹⁹ Governments must act now to rein in extreme wealth - to increase the taxation of wealth and corporate windfall profits, and to use this money to protect ordinary people and reduce inequality and poverty.

⁹ [Coram Childcare Survey - 2022.pdf](#)

¹⁰ www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/HolidayCC.pdf

¹¹ [OPFS and Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(2021\). Freeing low-income single parents from in-work poverty's grip](#)

¹² [OPFS and Oxfam Scotland \(2021\). Thriving, not just surviving.](#)

¹³ [Going without: deepening poverty in the UK | JRF](#)

¹⁴ [Housing and homelessness statistics - Shelter Scotland](#)

¹⁵ [Scottish Government \(2022\). Best Start Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-26](#)

¹⁶ [The causes of poverty | CPAG](#)

¹⁷ [Higher inequality in the UK linked to higher poverty \(lse.ac.uk\)](#)

¹⁸ [Care in the Time of Coronavirus: Oxfam Policy & Practice](#)

¹⁹ [Never mind the billionaires, let's raise up the essential workers! | Oxfam GB](#)

At this time of a profound cost of living crisis for millions of people in Britain, governments must listen to ordinary people in their calls to tackle extreme levels of inequality.

Methodology

An anonymous online survey featuring optional closed and open-ended questions was opened on 14 March and closed on 4 April 2022. The survey was promoted to single parents using OPFS's social media channels, website and newsletter.

242 single parents responded to the survey. As responses to every question were not mandatory, the number of responses to each question are marked throughout this report.

In April and May 2022, three focus groups were facilitated with single parents accessing our local services in Dundee, Falkirk, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, using a combination of Zoom video conferencing and face-to-face attendance.

14 single parents participated in these discussions, while an additional **four** (who intended but were unable to attend the focus groups) provided written statements. The focus groups ensured that we captured views from demographic groups which were under-represented in our survey, including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic single parents (who made up half of the focus group participants).

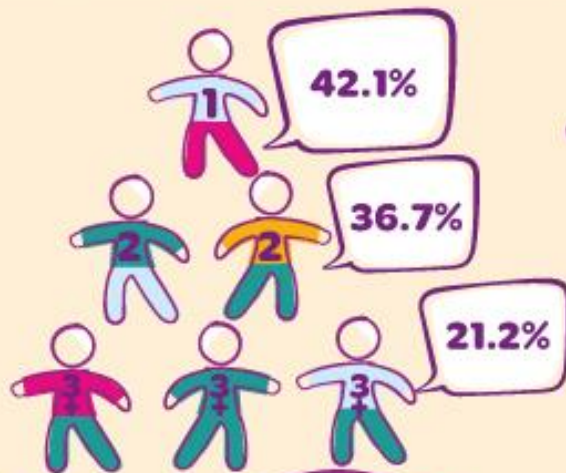
From the collated responses to both the survey and focus groups, we carried out a thematic analysis of the data to identify emerging themes.

DEMOGRAPHICS

In total, 260 single parents took part in the OPFS consultation. From the 242 online survey responses, we can identify the following profile.



NUMBER OF CHILDREN



AGE OF CHILDREN



PART TIME
32.2%

The majority of **single parents** are in paid work.

FULL TIME
34.8%

27.9%
NOT IN PAID WORK

56.6% of single parent respondents and **35.9%** of their **children** have a **disability** or physical or mental health condition which limits their daily activities.

PART 2: SUMMARY

Key findings

Themes arising from the research are discussed separately, but each are inextricably linked in a complex web of pressures, barriers and challenges which impact families, causing untold hardship and misery.

Cost of living

- Almost all (**97.9%**) participants say they feel the impact of these rising costs, either significantly or to some extent.
- Three in five (**61.1%**) participants say they are finding it either extremely difficult to afford or could no longer afford electricity, while **58.1%** say the same about gas, and **43.7%** say the same about food.
- More than one in five participants say they can no longer afford to buy clothes (**21.2%**), pay for travel (**22.3%**) or childcare (**21.2%**) at all.

Family finances

- **37.4%** of respondents say their finances had decreased in the last year.
- Participants whose finances had decreased were finding it harder to cover living costs.
- However, even among those whose finances had stayed the same or increased, one in three (**34.8%**) say they are finding it extremely difficult or can no longer afford food, while around half say the same of electricity (**52.2%**), gas (**52.9%**), or travel (**49.6%**).

Housing

- One in four (**24.8%**) participants say they are experiencing housing issues and concerns most of the time, and 22.3% say they are experiencing these issues some of the time.
- Issues commonly highlighted by participants included: unaffordable properties; spiralling mortgage/rent increases; bad credit; cramped conditions; poor living standards, and poor standards of property maintenance.

Cost of the school day

- When asked about the costs facing their families, a key theme raised by participants was the difficulty in meeting the demands to pay for uniforms, school trips, and the myriad of other requirements for daily school life.
- While costs are rising across the board, support for families in these areas is not increasing, leading to an even greater drain on household budgets.

Social connections and meaningful activity

- Many single parents told us that they and their children have a lack of activities or social interaction to look forward to.
- Money concerns were the most common reason for this. The result has been increased social isolation and poorer wellbeing for parents and children.
- Nearly two in five (**38%**) participants indicate that they can no longer afford entertainment at all, while a further **25%** say it is becoming extremely difficult to afford.

Debt

- Debt was a common thread which emerged in the research, with many participants expressing worries about debts which are growing dramatically as living costs rise.

Employment

- **34.8%** of participants were working full-time, **32.2%** were working part-time, and a further **5.2%** were self-employed. Additionally, **4.3%** of participants were in education or training and not in paid work alongside this.
- **40.9%** of those in paid work say they are finding it extremely difficult to afford food or could no longer afford, while over half say the same of electricity (**56.2%**), gas (**52.8%**) and travel (**55.2%**).
- Participants raised multiple barriers which make it more difficult for single parents to get into work or into better paid jobs. These included: lack of affordable and flexible childcare; lack of flexibility from employers; risk of losing out financially by working/earning more; health issues or disability – either the parent’s or their children’s.

Childcare

- Participants were asked about both early years and school age childcare, and a predominant theme in their responses was the struggle to afford childcare on a low income.
- Other key issues that arose were: childcare which was not reflective of actual need; lack of childcare availability, either in terms of suitable services within the local area or available places for children; the need for employers to demonstrate more flexibility and understanding.

Social security benefits

- More than three in four (**78%**) survey participants are in receipt of some form of social security benefit
- Many participants reflected on the pressures of having insufficient money to meet daily costs because of inadequate benefit levels. Others highlighted the complexity and stresses caused by the benefit system.

Disability in the family

- Participants who were either disabled themselves or have a disabled child raised particular issues around access to employment, childcare and activities for their children, and the costs associated with meeting their own and their children’s specific needs.

- Nearly half (**46.7%**) of single parents without disability in the household are in full-time paid employment, compared to **28.3%** of those who have a child with a disability or physical/mental condition that limits daily activities, and just **17.7%** of those who have a disability themselves.
- Meanwhile, only **8.4%** of single parents without disability in the household are not in paid work, education or training, compared to **41.2%** of disabled single parents and **28.3%** of single parents with disabled children.

Health and wellbeing

- We asked single parents how often they have felt anxious, stressed, or struggled with their mental health. Over half (**56.2%**) say they feel this way most of the time and over a quarter (**29.6%**) say they feel this way some of the time.
- Participants who are finding it extremely difficult to afford food or can no longer afford it are more than twice as likely as other participants to say they are struggling with their mental health ‘most of the time’, at **83.7%** compared to **34.9%**.

Covid-19

- Nearly 8 in 10 (**78%**) of participants say they still feel the impact of Covid-19 on their family.
- Financial inequality was compounded by the pandemic, while increased social isolation, disruption to daily life, and limitations placed on social freedoms all had a negative impact on families.

Single parents’ policy priorities

- More than two-thirds (**68.3%**) of respondents said improving social security benefits like Universal Credit was amongst their top three policy priorities.
- The second most commonly selected issue in respondents’ top three was “ending the benefit cap” (**46.3%**), and the third was “for single parents to be valued and treated equally” (**29.3%**).
- Taken together, childcare for school-age children (**25.4%**) and for under-fives (**15.1%**) was ranked in the top three priorities by two in five (45.5%) of participants.

Recommendations

This consultation has highlighted a range of areas where single parents would like to see action from each level of government. Based on parents have told us, we have identified the following key actions which should be taken to improve the lives of single parent families:

UK Government

- 1. Introduce progressive tax measures to tackle inequality.**
- 2. Tackle the immediate cost of living crisis for low-income families with emergency interventions.**
- 3. Introduce single parents' rights and protection from discrimination into law.**
- 4. Invest in a social security system that prevents child poverty, treating single parent families with dignity and respect.**
- 5. Make childcare work for single parents by enhancing support for childcare costs through Universal Credit.**
- 6. Support single parents into well paid, family friendly employment.**
- 7. Make the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) fairer and fit for purpose.**

Scottish Government

- 1. Provide support to reduce household costs and increase income to help families meet their basic needs during the cost of living crisis.**
- 2. Invest further in Scotland's social security benefits and payments to lift more families out of poverty.**
- 3. Tackle the cost of the school day by expanding support for families through free school meals and clothing grants.**
- 4. Invest in a 'Fair Start for Single Parents' employability support, recognising that single parents face gendered structural barriers to entering, sustaining, and progressing in paid work.**
- 5. Ensure single parents are not excluded from further and higher education.**
- 6. Implement a childcare delivery plan which provides flexible, affordable, high quality early years, school age and holiday childcare.**
- 7. Take action to address the digital exclusion faced by low-income families.**

8. **Ensure that integrated national and local policies support family wellbeing to help tackle child poverty and to achieve Scottish Government targets.**
9. **Ensure every child lives in a decent, secure, affordable, and warm home.**
10. **Ensure the public transport system works for single parent families.**
11. **Gather and publish evidence more effectively of how the Child Poverty Delivery Plan impacts on targets set to reduce child poverty in lone parent families.**
12. **Involve 'experts by experience' in policies that affect them.**

Local authorities

1. **Recognise that single parents and their children face systemic discrimination across all areas of life and ensure local services treat single parents with dignity and respect.**
2. **Plan to tackle child poverty with a clear focus on the Child Poverty Delivery Plan priority families.**
3. **Ensure access to an adequate supply of affordable, secure, good quality family housing considering the needs of single parent families.**
4. **Deliver and fund a single parent tailored employability pathway and support 'fair work' employment opportunities for single parents.**
5. **Use local powers to deliver more cash support to families and build on experience of ensuring a dignified cash-first approach to income crises.**
6. **Improve access to high quality, free childcare which offers a flexible model to meet the need of working parents.**
7. **Tackle the cost of the school day.**
8. **Invest in holistic family support and develop a 'Supporting Families Strategy'.**

PART THREE: FINDINGS

Cost of living crisis

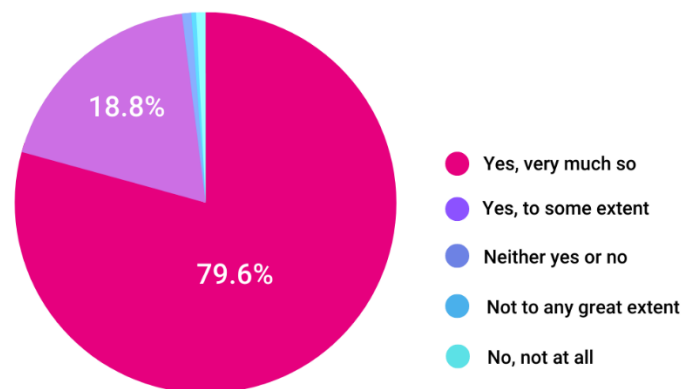
“I feel I am failing my children because I should be able to afford the very basics at least for them. And I can’t even do that!”

As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK is facing another crisis in the form of the rising cost of living. Economic instability has driven inflation up to a 40-year high: the annual rate of inflation on food prices rose to 12.5% in July²⁰, while the energy price cap was increased by 54% in April²¹, and by a further 27% on October 1st²².

We knew from our support and advice services that household budgets were already being squeezed to breaking point by rising costs within the first months of 2022, and we wanted to hear more from single parents about how this was affecting them.

Our survey asked whether the rising prices in food, transport and fuel were having a detrimental impact on single parents’ income. Almost all (97.9%) participants say they feel the impact of these rising costs, either significantly or to some extent (See Figure 1 below)²³. These findings echo the feedback from focus groups.

Figure 1: Do you feel the impact of price rises in food, fuel and transport?



Single parents taking part in the focus groups and survey often provided a bleak picture of people at their wits end struggling to cope financially from one day to the next.

“The little I am left with each month since the energy prices have gone up, means I have no extra money for days out. I have only enough to survive each month, but I struggle. Especially when appliances and things like this break. I can’t afford

²⁰ [Office of National Statistics \(2022\). Consumer price inflation, UK: July 2022.](#)

²¹ [OfGem \(February 2022\). Price cap to increase by £693 from April.](#)

²² [Liz Truss's energy guarantee puts price cap at £2,500 for a typical household for two years \(September 2022\)](#)

²³ n = 240

to save for anything anymore. I am at times eating very little to help cut down my food shopping.”

“My two children have no clothes that fit, everything is too small. I must go without meals most days, living off what the kids leave, kids been sharing a bath to cut the gas costs. I get washed down most days and only bathe twice a week now.”

There is a real sense that mainstream government actions are overlooking the specific needs of low-income parents, undermining the current UK Government policy principles based on ‘no-one left behind’ and ‘levelling up’.

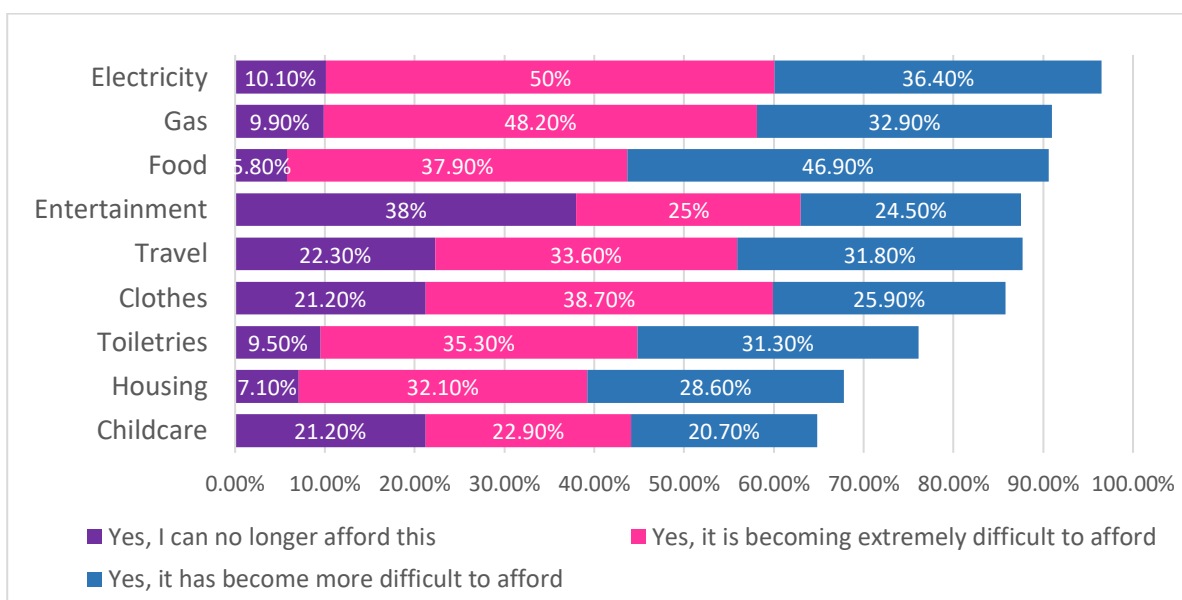
“With rising costs, I am finding that money isn’t going as far as it used to, I’m struggling to keep up. I used to be quite good with meal planning and budgeting for clothing needs but feel quite limited to what I can for or plan for.”

“I was told that my bill was going up by £400 and my energy would cost would now cost more than my mortgage. We’ve had the central heating off for a month now and are using small heaters and blanket, hot water bottle. I’ve never been worried about bills like this before, but it is really quite scary.”

Focusing on specific outgoings, our survey identified where participants are struggling most and where difficult choices are having to be made. Concerningly, the most common areas of financial drain are in basic living needs such as the ability to eat and stay warm (see Figure 2)²⁴.

Three in five (**61.1%**) participants say they are finding it either extremely difficult to afford or could no longer afford electricity, while **58.1%** say the same about gas, and **43.7%** say the same about food. More than one in five participants say they can no longer afford to buy clothes (**21.2%**), pay for travel (**22.3%**) or childcare (**21.2%**) at all.

Figure 2: Have any of your daily living costs been impacted during the last year?



²⁴ n = 228

These experiences resonate with the findings of a recent social trends report by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) report²⁵, in which around 9 in 10 (89%) adults reported their cost of living had risen over the past month in May 2022, compared with 62% in November 2021.

Overwhelmingly, the participants describe not having enough to live on and the negative impact this is having on their families. It is noteworthy that the cost of living overshadowed all other areas raised within the survey and focus groups, as single parents told us they did not have the financial resources to meet even the most basic essential needs.

"I can't afford most of the stuff at the increased prices. It's often a decision I need to make to choose what I need to prioritise for my child and myself. Skip certain types of food, skip fuel and reduce journeys, skip using the heating altogether etc."

"I am really concerned about rising energy prices. I live in an old flat that can be expensive to keep warm. We have pre-paid gas which is making it even more expensive just now. I have a relatively good income, but things are still tight, and I'm worried about my savings running out quickly."

Parents told us the cost of living rise is having a catastrophic impact on their wellbeing, be it financial, emotional and/or physical. Participants say they are cutting back on costs such as clothes, personal items, social activities and even meals.

Food insecurity

A striking feature of the consultation results is the repeated reference to food poverty. Multiple participants recount how they skipped meals and did not have enough money to feed their family, while many others talk about choosing between heating the home or eating.

"We don't eat breakfast; cost of pack lunches is crazy added extra and due to kids' age school meals are not free. I can only afford to feed my two children most days, I [am] only eating cups of soup and tell them I'm on a diet to explain why I am not eating, no heating on struggle for basics ..."

"...If my son leaves anything on his plate then I will eat that. If not, I just eat toast most days now."

"I work, I have disabilities but struggle to put food on the table [and] have heating on. No flooring in home and no TV and rising debt but no help because I work ... it's upsetting, just to afford to make pack lunches, I go myself without breakfast, lunch every day."

"We are barely making ends meet, depending on food banks and handouts by family and friends."

²⁵ [Office of National Statistics \(2022\). Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: 6 to 17 July 2022](#)

Housing

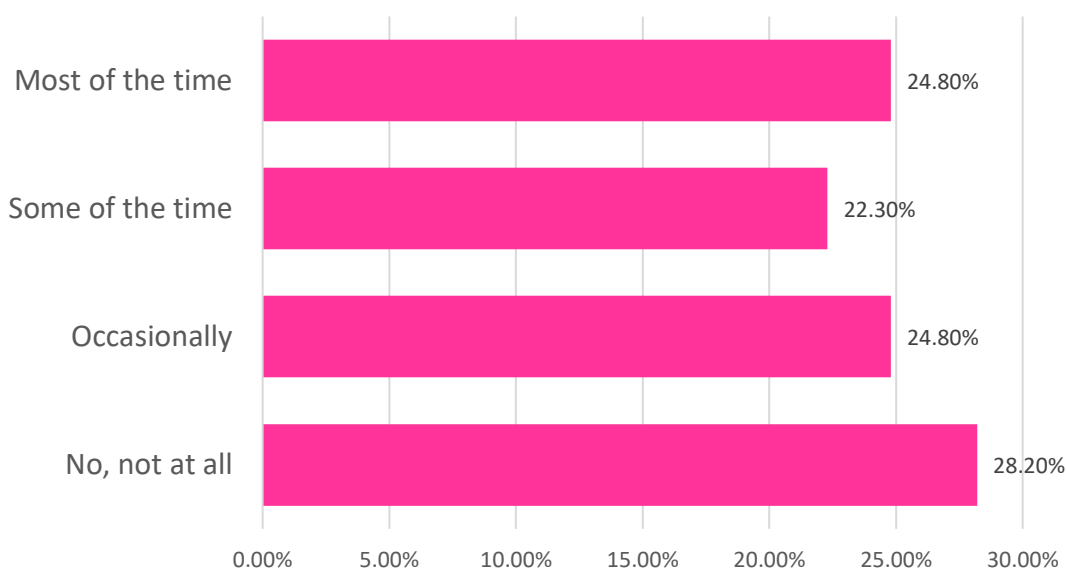
“Living with rats, council are slow to manage this. Leaking roof and sewage problem aren’t being fixed. Living in an area with a lot of criminal behaviour down to intimidation daily and kids are scared but we can’t get moved.”

Everyone has the right to safe, affordable housing. However, many single parents told us that they struggle to secure even this most basic needs for their families.

A number of serious housing issues were raised by participants, including those living in social housing, renting from private landlords, and those who owned their own homes with a mortgage.

One in four (**24.8%**) participants said they were experiencing housing issues and concerns most of the time (see Figure 3)²⁶.

Figure 3: Do you have any housing issues/concerns?



Issues commonly highlighted by participants included:

- Unaffordable properties
- Spiralling mortgage/rent increases
- Bad credit
- Cramped conditions
- Poor living standards and poor standards of property maintenance.

“Rent is so high and unaffordable to get a bigger place with more space.”

“I am in private accommodation, and I worry that my landlord

²⁶ n = 238

will either increase the rent or decide to sell up. I don't feel secure."

"I can't afford my rent but can't afford to move house and I don't think I'd pass the credit check for a new private let so need to wait on social housing becoming available and continue to get more in debt trying to pay my rent. UC caps how much housing benefit I can get, and it doesn't cover my full rent."

"I live in a damp private rented house with no smoke alarms and a front door that doesn't lock properly...have no chance of getting social housing."

"I can't afford my rent and I'm in rent arrears. I'm scared we will get evicted and be homeless."

"I have a huge mortgage that I'm tied into after my husband and I split almost three years ago. About 85% of my part time wage goes towards paying this each month. My husband hasn't contributed since we split."

[Box] Case study

At one of the focus groups, a parent described her experiences of living in temporary homeless accommodation, in a large flat with high ceilings. She explained that because the flat was temporary, she had no control over home improvements and had to put up with poor standards of insulation and heating. Her family were resorting to keeping warm under blankets and wearing heavy cardigans in the house. Consequently, this has had a direct impact on her wellbeing and that of her children.

Transport

Transport is an important issue for single parent families because of its potential impact on income, household expenditure and mitigating the effects of poverty. Participants told us that transport costs are acting as a barrier to their access to work and opportunities, childcare, appointments, activities for children and lower cost supermarkets.

Some parents highlighted the impact of **rising petrol costs**.

"I use my car for work too so because of rising costs I've had to stop activities with the kids to ensure I can keep working so that I keep earning. Quality of life has rapidly decreased due to petrol now being unaffordable."

"I have had to leave a job as could no longer afford the petrol costs."

Others said that **costs and availability of public transport** were leading them to cut down on their use – even where this was having a negative impact on other aspects of their lives.

"I am no longer getting bus as it's just an extra expense. I will walk 6 - 10 mile a day to meet immediate needs food wise as local Co-op is expensive compared to Aldi and other budget markets."

"Reduce the constant price rises on public transport especially the trains which are very expensive during peak travel times."

For many participants, a key challenge was navigating complex and costly transport arrangements as a single parent between schools, childcare and work.

"Transport is another key concern; the new free bus travel scheme is great (although difficult to navigate the application process) but where we live the best transport to school is by train which isn't covered by the scheme and the costs add up."

"Transport arrangements as I can't drive and costing me £600 plus every 4 weeks as can't get public transport for her school and then me get to work on time so need to get a taxi as I am a teacher."

"Meeting childcare costs and arranging transport for my disabled children to get to college."

- *"Transport arrangements. Working FT as a single parent and juggling school drop off and pick up is challenging."*

Changes in family finances

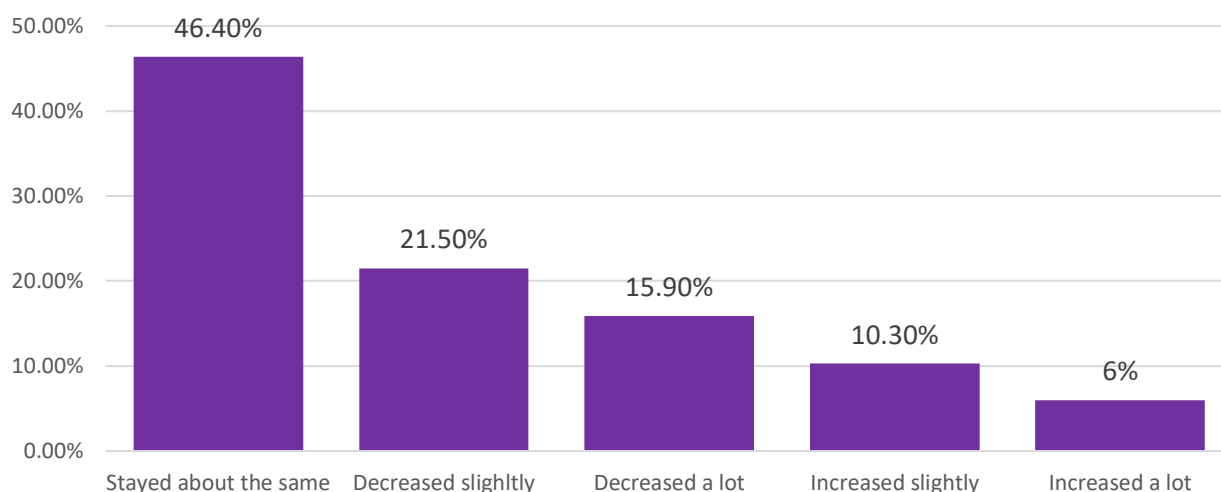
When considering the increasing challenges facing single parents in affording everyday living costs, we wanted to examine the role of reductions in family incomes.

As of April 2021, the Universal Credit uplift of £20 per week which had been in place since the previous April was removed. Meanwhile, the first Scottish Child Payments (SCP) for children under six whose parents are in receipt of qualifying benefits (like Universal Credit) were made in May 2021. Initially this was a payment of £10 per week, until April 2022 when this rose to £20 per week.

The SCP won't be rolled out to children aged six and over until 14 November 2022, and in the meantime bridging payments are being made to families every three months which amount to £10 per week per child.

As a result, we expected a substantial portion of families to be financially worse off at the time of the survey (March – April 2022) as compared with the previous year. Figure 4 shows that **37.4%** of respondents say their finances had decreased in the last year²⁷.

Figure 4: Has there been any change to your family finances?



As anticipated, participants whose finances had decreased were finding it harder to cover living costs, however, even among those whose finances had stayed the same or increased, a substantial proportion are struggling to cover essentials (see Figure 5)²⁸.

One in three (**34.8%**) of those whose finances were the same or higher say they are finding it extremely difficult or can no longer afford food, while around half say the same of electricity (**52.2%**), gas (**52.9%**), or travel (**49.6%**).

²⁷ n = 233

²⁸ n = 220

Figure 5: Proportion of parents who say they are finding it extremely difficult to afford or could no longer afford the following costs, compared by position of family finances

	Food	Electricity	Gas	Travel	Housing
Family finances stayed the same or increased	34.8%	52.2%	52.9%	49.6%	31.7%
Family finances decreased	58.8%	74.1%	88.5%	65.8%	49.3%

Cost of the school day

All children and young people should have equal access to a good education. Yet, while school itself is free, there are many costs associated with education that mean children in low-income families can be left at a disadvantage.

When asked about the costs facing their families, a key theme raised by participants was the difficulty in meeting the demands to pay for uniforms, school trips, and the myriad of other requirements for daily school life.

While costs are rising across the board, support for families in these areas is not increasing, leading to an even greater drain on household budgets.

“The oldest needed a bus pass every month which was a big cost for travel to high school along with lunch money...With all my kids it is a struggle for uniforms, and I am unsure of any costs for nursery. When school trips come up, I get nervous as to the cost implications, but I don’t want kids to miss out too.”

“There is always something extra to pay for - sponsored events, book fairs, craft fairs, Christmas fairs, Halloween costume, Red Nose Day, Christmas jumper, wear a certain colour for sports day, world book day costume etc... Parental events are held either during working hours or in the evening so I feel excluded as I can’t afford a babysitter- shame online events aren’t continuing.”

“Affordability of school uniforms. My child will start high school this year and I am grateful for the school uniform grant however £150 doesn’t get much at this age especially when they all want to wear the latest thing.”

“Having suitable uniform for my kids to wear, especially the high school as so much bullying comes from appearance.”

Digital exclusion

As the world becomes increasingly digital, there is a real risk that inequalities in education will only become more pronounced. Some participants say that they are struggling or unable to afford the internet or devices needed to support their children’s learning, while schools increasingly expect work to be completed online.

“I have to walk all my 5 kids to school, don’t have the funds, don’t have internet either, so my kids can’t do their homework because it’s all online now.”

“The cost of transport takes up a 5th of my wages and internet should be free for single parents, it’s not a luxury but an essential need for my son’s schoolwork and my Uni work.”

“Broadband is 3 month in arrears, if can’t get back on my feet kids won’t be able to do homework online.”

Social connections and meaningful activity

“We don’t go out as a family.”

Taking part in activities and interactions with others is vital, not only because our health and wellbeing depends on it, but also because it helps to reduce inequalities – as recognised by the Scottish Government’s National Performance Framework.²⁹

Everyone is entitled to have fun and leisure, and to experience meaningful social connections. For children and young people, access to these opportunities is an essential part of development and learning which can have lifelong impacts.

Many single parents told us that they and their children have a lack of activities or social interaction to look forward to. As shown in Figure 2, nearly two in five (**38%**) participants indicate that they can no longer afford entertainment at all, while a further **25%** say it is becoming extremely difficult to afford.

Money concerns were the most common factor raised by participants as preventing their family from participating in activities, clubs, or hobbies. The result has been increased social isolation and poorer wellbeing for parents and children.

“Hobbies and clubs for my child to socialise and get out of the house now has to be restricted meaning this impacts my child’s emotional health and wellbeing.”

“My debt is rising to cover the basics e.g., rent, food etc. This can’t go on. Children’s activities have stopped when they need to be doing them after a horrible 2 years. Their mental health is declining.”

“Not able to consider any holiday this year as my monthly money leaves almost nothing after [council] tax and heating costs each month, and the increase in weekly food shop. We don’t go to the cinema due to costs of travel.”

“We never have anything left over at month end and have no money to pay bills let alone enjoy life. We never go on holiday, never eat out or spend money on social activities. Quality of life is very poor, and I really feel guilty for my son having such a boring existence.”

²⁹ [Scottish Government \(2021\). National Performance Framework.](#)

Unmanageable debt

Single parents are disproportionately disadvantaged by debt problems. Scottish Government statistics indicate that prior to the pandemic lone parent households were consistently the household type most likely to be in unmanageable debt and likely to be financially vulnerable.³⁰

This is likely the result of several factors: the poverty and income insecurity which many single parents face due to caring for a child on one income and a lack of suitably flexible, secure, and fairly paid employment; debts arising from relationship breakdown or economic abuse; and other unexpected changes in circumstances such as unemployment and illness, without the savings to act as a buffer.

Debt was a common thread which emerged in the research, with many participants expressing worries about debts which are only growing as living costs rise.

“If I borrow to get through the month, I start off the next month with even less and the cycle continues. It feels like an impossible puzzle sometimes and a massive stress that weighs me down and holds me back from enjoying life with my sons.”

“I’m in debt as have had to resort to credit cards for buying food etc. Can’t access food bank because it’s only open when I work. The other option is by referral, and I don’t have someone to refer me anyway.”

“Have had to purchase clothes and birthdays gifts from catalogues - buy now pay later. Up to my eyeballs in debt because I have no disposable income, just making ends meet.”

“Father used to pay maintenance when he felt like it, but now has a limited company to avoid declaring his actual income. I can’t afford anything and feel like I’m stuck in debt forever. Utilities went from £90 to £160 and is only going to rise.”

[Box] The Scottish Parliament Social Justice Committee recently conducted an inquiry on the challenges faced by people with low incomes and debt problems, against a backdrop of increasing pressure from the cost of living on household incomes³¹. Its conclusions regarding the impact of the cost of living crisis and problem debt, mirror and reinforce the findings of our consultation.

³⁰ [Scottish Government \(2022\). Wealth in Scotland 2006-2020.](#)

³¹ [Social Justice and Security Committee \(2022\). Robbing Peter to pay Paul: Low income and the debt trap.](#)

Employment

“Work does not pay – we are still living in poverty and struggle to pay for even the basics of things.”

Single parents are disproportionately concentrated in lower paid occupations, which are often part-time, less secure and involve short-term or zero-hour contracts³². Consequently, single parents in work are often struggling more than other employees to meet the demands of the cost of living. This was reflected in our research findings.

34.8% of participants were working full-time, **32.2%** were working part-time, and a further **5.2%** were self-employed. Additionally, **4.3%** of participants were in education or training and not in paid work alongside this³³.

[Box] With **72.2%** of participants in paid work, this figure closely matches the finding from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) that 69% of single parents in the UK are in employment³⁴. It is also important to note that the ONS finds that employment is only lower than the average among single parents with young children, with just 49% of those with children aged 0-2 and 50% of those with children aged 3-4 in paid work, compared to 77% of those with children aged 5-10 and 79% with children aged 11-15.

Single parents face unique challenges to entering work when their children are young, but since 2017 DWP conditions expect them to enter into work when their youngest child turns three.

In-work poverty

We asked participants about any concerns or issues they were experiencing around employment. Our research found that for many working single parents, wages do not provide a means to escape poverty.

“I am on a zero-hour contract so this job can disappear in an instant... I have no security even though I have given everything for this job in the last three months.”

“Wages do not keep up with costs of living. Work is stressful and demanding, poor wages don’t help.”

The survey findings indicate that although parents who are not in paid work are finding it hardest to afford essential costs, a significant proportion of those in paid work are also struggling (see Figure 6)³⁵.

Two in five (**40.9%**) of those in paid work say they are finding it extremely difficult to afford food or could no longer afford it at all, while over half say the same of electricity (**56.2%**), gas (**52.8%**) and travel (**55.2%**).

³² [Office of National Statistics \(2017\). Persistent poverty in the UK and EU: 2017.](#)

³³ n = 233

³⁴ [Office of National Statistics \(2020\). Labour Force Survey performance and quality monitoring report: July to September 2020.](#)

³⁵ n = 219

Figure 6: Proportion of parents who say they are finding it extremely difficult to afford or could no longer afford the following costs, compared by employment status

	Food	Electricity	Gas	Travel	Housing
In paid work	40.9%	56.2%	52.8%	55.2%	34.3%
Not in paid work	48.3%	68.8%	68.3%	57.4%	49%

Participants told us that their income varies from month to month and that costs such as transport and childcare eat up any financial gains from paid work. This insecurity of income is leaving people in a precarious position.

“Concerned about being able to keep my job as I can’t afford childcare anymore and I’m struggling to work flexibly as my job requires.”

“...the choices I make daily are getting harder...weeks we rely on food donations and surplus food at reduced prices. Not ideal for someone on full time employment.”

“Only having one income is a struggle and trying to keep my teenage son from feeling the effects of poverty is getting harder. He can’t understand why when he sees me work and study hard with no reward. He does not get those experiences that make it all worthwhile. No cinema, no trampoline parks. He is 13 and never had a holiday.”

Barriers to employment or job progression

Another recurring issue raised by participants was that multiple barriers make it more difficult for single parents to get into work or into better paid jobs. These included:

- Lack of affordable and flexible childcare
- Lack of flexibility from employers
- False assumptions by employers that single parents could call upon supportive family networks for childcare
- Risk of losing out financially by working/earning more
- Health issues or disability – either the parent’s or their children’s
- And, related to all of these: time. Many participants raised the issue of insufficient time to both carry out all of their responsibilities for their children and work more hours in paid employment.

“I have a really flexible employer that supports me as a single parent of a child with health problems but to progress my career I would need to go elsewhere. And I daren’t as I doubt many places would be as flexible.”

“Have no-one to look after child before or after school. So only looking for term time work.”

“If I work too many hours I lose some UC [Universal Credit], Carers Allowance and rise in council tax payments.”

“I have 3 children with ASD [Autistic Spectrum Disorder]. I am qualified but unable to work due to the need for me to be on hand. I am concerned about resuming work once benefits stop.”

Childcare

Childcare is inextricably linked with employment, and with equal opportunities to enter and progress in employment. Given the challenges many single parents (most of whom are women) face around work and poverty, we wanted to know more about how childcare is working for them and where the gaps are.

Participants were asked about both early years and school age childcare, and a predominant theme in their responses was the struggle to afford childcare on a low income.

“With childcare costs rising I won’t be able to afford it and continue to work.”

“I work part time and job centre are continually asking me to work more hours, but childcare is too expensive.”

Other key issues that arose in this consultation include:

- childcare which was not reflective of actual need
- lack of childcare availability, either in terms of suitable services within the local area or available places for children
- the need for employers to demonstrate more flexibility and understanding.

“There are not enough places in the breakfast clubs or after school care clubs, my work must fit in with school times as I couldn’t get a place in either.”

“Free childcare hours at council nursery don’t fit with my working hours. Not enough childcare for primary age children in holiday periods - particularly for lone parents like myself when you only get 5 weeks annual leave but have to cover 13 weeks school holidays with no other parent involved. Logistics of trying to work with 2 children in separate locations.”

“Early years works fine for me now. However I’m concerned about childcare when my child starts school. I will only be able to work between 9:30am and 2:30pm to enable me to do pick up/drop off.”

“Childcare stops age 11 but I can’t leave him all day over the holidays. He’s still too wee. Any provision there is are activity camps and mega expensive.”

Flexible, high quality, affordable childcare provision is a key priority for single parents. One Parent Families Scotland has long campaigned for a better childcare system which takes account of single parents’ particular needs. This consultation highlights that great investment is needed and at a faster pace.

Social security

More than three in four (**78%**) survey participants are in receipt of some form of social security benefit³⁶. This reflects the fact that single parents are more likely to have a low income, whether because they are out of work, or - in the majority of cases - working in lower-paid and/or part-time jobs.

The findings from the survey and focus groups provide some insight into the impact of a social security system that fails to prevent poverty for single parent families.

Many participants reflected on the pressures of having insufficient money to meet daily costs because of inadequate benefit levels. Others highlighted the complexity of the benefit system, stress caused by the Universal Credit system in particular, the benefit cap, the two-child limit, and the need to raise benefit levels in line with inflation.

Parents at the Edinburgh/Falkirk focus group told us that being on Universal Credit increased their anxiety and did nothing to alleviate their financial problems. Rather, it caused more difficulty.

“The stress of knowing that I will have to eventually move over to UC fills me with dread because the system is simply not fit for purpose. I have little option and I worry about it every day on top of everything else. It is a constant cycle of worry and stress.”

“I work and it’s no good for me to get my wages increased as when my increase was eventually put through, and I was to be paid in December wage I got Universal Credit cut as it was seen as income when I received a Covid payment for working through Covid... So when you think might have a little extra cash for bills or to get kids a little treat, you don’t ... as you know you are going to be short with deductions.”

It is clear from respondents that the pressures on their ability to continue to support their families is at times intense and that benefits are critical but often insufficient. Cuts to support like the £20 per week Universal Credit uplift and changing circumstances such as working hours or children’s ages mean that parents receiving social security are in a precarious position.

“With the cut by the time you have paid everything there’s no way to keep up with the cost of living. That £80 cut is worse now than ever. It really now all goes on electric.”

“I lose most of my CTC [Child Tax Credit] as soon as I start working more, which I need to do to meet bills. It is a complex and stressful process keeping on top of the form filling, etc.”

“They are not enough and some will cut out for example Scottish Child Payment only until 6 years.”

“My daughter is 16 and has been unable to continue education or work due to mental health issues, we have received no support but all my benefits for her have been stopped.”

Equally, participants told us that they would prefer not to rely on benefits, and would rather be in paid work which enables them to be financially independent and have a decent standard of living. Parents are not only arguing for an increase in benefit payments, but for their dignity and sense of value in society.

³⁶ n = 242

“After paying rent and council tax I am left with £470 for the month to pay the rest of my bills, petrol, food, nappies etc. It really is a very low amount... I do not have help for childcare so I am not able to return to work just now. I have worked since I was 13 and really find it difficult relying on the benefits.”

Disability in the family

National statistics indicate that 40% of children in lone parent families also live in households where at least one person is disabled³⁷. It is also known that families where someone is disabled are at a greater risk of poverty.³⁸

From our support and advice services, we know that many parents who reach out to us are disabled or have disabled children. We wanted to know more about the experiences of single parent families with disabilities and the particular challenges they are facing.

Responses from participants highlight that many of the structural barriers which affect single parent families are only reinforced for those with disabilities. For example, participants raised issues around access to employment, childcare and activities for their children, and the costs associated with meeting their own and their children's specific needs.

"Increased food costs - autistic child must have specific items, nut allergies exclude some cheaper versions of foods. Additional heating and lighting costs due to autistic child's sensory needs and also my own disability. Increased diesel costs when I rely on the car to access shops/lots of medical appointments."

"I do feel the impact in cost of living, unfortunately due to disability I'm unable to work... An appropriate care package would allow my son and I to access free or cheaper activities. Transport would ensure my child didn't miss out on education or participation in evening/holiday clubs."

"The cost of childcare and the major lack of provision for children with additional needs for after school or weekend clubs. My daughter now attends 2 additional support needs (ASN) clubs... she was on a waiting list for nearly 5 years for both... The serious lack in carer provision too - there still isn't the carers available... We are being failed by the government. As a sole ASN parent, there is almost no help available."

"I have a disability and have found employers as well as the job centre to be not so understanding of this when I am trying to find work."

Our survey identified that both disabled parents and parents with disabled children were significantly less likely to be in paid work or to be working full-time than other single parents (see figure 7)³⁹.

Nearly half (**46.7%**) of participants without disability in the household are in full-time paid employment, compared to **28.3%** of those who have a child with a disability or physical/mental health condition that limits daily activities, and just **17.7%** of those who have a disability or physical/mental health themselves.

³⁷ [Scottish Government \(2020\). Tackling child poverty: second year progress report - annex C. Child poverty among lone parent families.](#)

³⁸ [Scottish Government \(2021\). Tackling child poverty priority families overview.](#)

³⁹ n =224

Figure 7: Proportion of single parents with different employment statuses, compared by whether parent or their children have a disability or condition which limits daily activities.

	In full-time paid work	In part-time paid work	Self-employed	Not in paid work
Parent has a disability or physical/mental health condition	17.7%	33.3%	3.1%	45.8%
Parent has a child with a disability or physical/mental health condition	28.3%	34.3%	4.5%	32.8%
Neither	46.7%	31.8%	7.5%	14%

This underlines the importance of understanding the impact that different identities and inequalities can have on single parents' experiences.

For some single parents, returning to work or taking on more hours will not be possible due to their own or their child's health, making an adequate social security system even more vital. For others, systemic barriers facing disabled people in employment will need to be broken down, and greater supports offered for children with additional needs.

Health and wellbeing

We know that single parents are a marginalised and often invisible group who feel isolated, alone⁴⁰, and stigmatised.⁴¹ Our research sought to understand the impact which these experiences and the material inequalities faced by single parent families might be having on wellbeing.

A key theme which emerged was that the cost of living is having a significant impact on single parents' health – both physical and mental.

Many participants commented on struggling to afford **nutritious meals for their family**.

“Losing weight due to not being able to afford to eat enough.”

“My daughter must eat a very healthy diet due to her genetic condition and the dramatic rise in my groceries bill is making life difficult. Junk food is cheaper to buy than fruit and veg, but she must eat healthy to stay safe.”

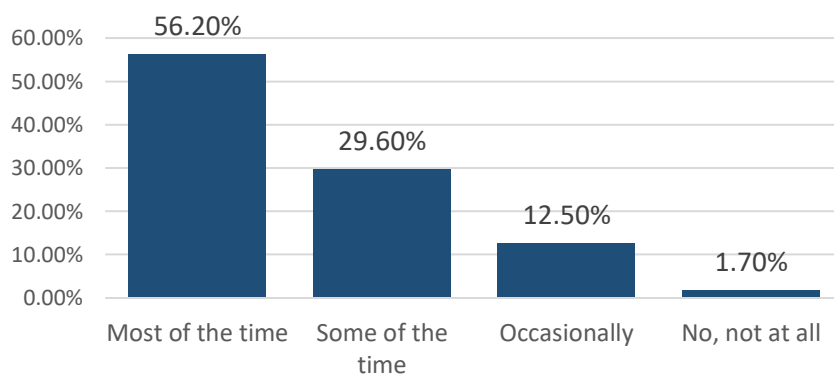
Others highlighted **sleep loss, exhaustion, and stress**.

“Stress very much about food for the kids. Sleep is disturbed and anxiety is very high.”

“It can make it hard to focus on work. It’s also exhausting, when I’m worried about money it’s like carrying around an additional weight that leaves you emotionally and physically drained by the end of each day.”

We asked single parents how often they have felt anxious, stressed, or struggled with their mental health. Over half (**56.2%**) say they feel this way most of the time and over a quarter (**29.6%**) say they feel this way some of the time (See Figure 8⁴²).

Figure 8. During the last year how often have you felt anxious, stressed, or struggled with your mental health?



⁴⁰ [One Parent Families Scotland and Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit \(SPIRU\) \(2018\). Social isolation, loneliness and single parents in Scotland.](#)

⁴¹ [Single Parent Rights \(2021\). Single Parent Discrimination: Realities and the Way Forward.](#)

⁴² n = 240

Participants’ responses indicate high stress levels, anxiety, depression, mood changes, and low self-esteem – with **money worries a consistent undercurrent.**

“I try to carry on as normal on the outside but inside I feel stressed and am constantly worrying about bills. How are these going to get paid, how much can we afford this week for food...I get a little more irritated easier.”

“I am constantly on edge and my chest is always heavy. I have panic attacks every day and I never have a peaceful moment. I have severe anxiety. It’s hard to be social to talk to people and sometimes I have a fear of going outside...”

The connection between poverty and mental health is also underlined by the finding that the 43.7% of participants who are finding it extremely difficult to afford food or can no longer afford it are more than twice as likely as other participants to say they are struggling with their mental health ‘most of the time’ (see Figure 9).⁴³

Figure 9: Proportion of parents who say they have felt anxious, stressed, or struggled with mental health with different regularities over the past year, compared by those who are finding it extremely difficult or are unable to afford food and those who are not

	Finding it extremely difficult to/ can no longer afford food	Can easily afford food, or finding it ‘more difficult’ but not extremely so
Struggling with mental health:		
Most of the time	83.7%	34.9%
Some of the time	14.3%	41.9%
Occasionally	2%	20.9%
Not at all	0%	2.3%

Participants point to the **severe adverse impacts these pressures are having on their lives and their families:**

“Depression, anxiety, stress. I am medicated and am doing CBT but despite engaging best I can, the reality is that of course I feel sad and stressed - I am responsible for the most amazing children but I am falling apart and terrified of losing my job.”

“The continuous worry about the cost of living can make you feel worthless when you struggle to provide for your children, especially when they look up to you to do that.”

“I don’t have enough to live on at all, I am suicidal, I feel my life is not worth living anymore.”

⁴³ n = 224

Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic, a global public health crisis, brought along with it an economic crisis which intensified the hardship, injustices, and alienation that low-income single parent families experience. Two years into the pandemic, we wanted to know how single parents felt this had impacted on them and their children, and whether the effects were still being felt.

Nearly 8 in 10 (**78%**) of participants say they still feel the impact of Covid-19 on their family⁴⁴.

Responses underline the inequalities experienced by single parents during the pandemic. Social isolation, disruption to daily life, and limitations placed on social freedoms all had a negative impact on families, which in turn affected their **health and wellbeing**.

“My kids struggle mentally from the pandemic. They are anxious going out now.”

“No social skills anymore like holding conversation etc as not used to it, still live in fear.”

“At first, we were OK and followed a routine with daily life and exercise. By the second we were strained, tired of limited opportunities. My youngest son has social anxiety still and has only started visiting local shops at school lunch time.”

The impact of lockdowns meant that single parents faced additional challenges such as **home-schooling**. Participants say they did not always feel equipped to educate their children or lacked the digital technology and access to enable this, leading to guilt and added pressure.

“As a single parent key worker, I really struggled with home-school and lack of available childcare.”

Where single parents were supporting **children with additional needs**, it was more difficult for those children to understand the enforced changes, placing more stress on the household.

“It was very hard being in lockdown as my youngest has autism and ADHD. Being stuck in the house was extremely difficult. My other children have really struggled being at home with her due to her challenging behaviour and they are struggling to go back to normal. They didn’t have the same technology their friends had so they lost friendships during lockdown, and they struggled with this.”

Financial inequality was also compounded by Covid -19.

“I have lost pay due to not being able to work, but apparently, I’m not entitled to a Covid- 19 grant due to me having a zero-hour contract even though I was supposed to work 3 x 8hr shifts that week. I have struggled emotionally as it’s hard being away

⁴⁴ n = 235

from family who give much needed support.”

“It led to me leaving my new job, this forced me onto Universal Credit from tax credits and there was a massive difference in finances.”

The OPFS Lone Parent Helpline identified a huge upsurge in calls from **women affected by domestic abuse** during the Covid-19 lockdowns. This reflects the findings of organisations such as Women’s Aid that the experience of those facing domestic abuse was exacerbated by the lockdowns.^{45 46}

The testimony of some of our participants confirmed this.

“My ex-partner’s children’s dad took the opportunity to restart a campaign of domestic violence and terror on me. He was gaslighting me and eventually it turned to him getting angry at kids. I have mental health issues due to what he’s done to us and then it was difficult to even seek help as he was keeping a check on our whereabouts constantly.”

“It’s been all survival. Also impacted my ex-partners ability to be abusive toward me and exploit my circumstances.”

⁴⁵ [Women’s Aid \(2021\). Shadow pandemic – shining a light on domestic abuse during Covid.](#)

⁴⁶ [Scottish Women’s Aid \(2020\). Crisis and Resilience: The Impact of a Global Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and Providers in Scotland.](#)

PART FOUR: SOLUTIONS

Single parents' policy priorities

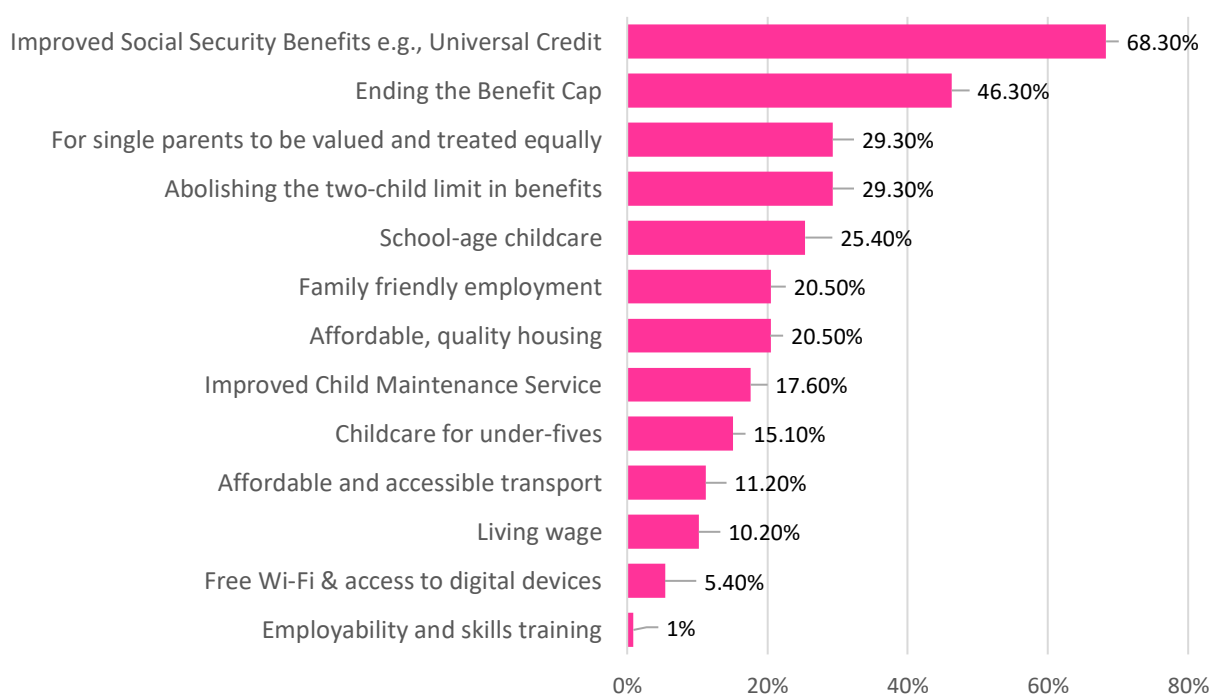
When we set out to consult with single parents about their experiences and the challenges facing their families, we also wanted to be solutions focused. With this in mind, we asked parents to tell us what they think would make things better and what issues One Parent Families Scotland should focus our energies on in our campaigns for change.

When presented with a selection of 13 options, based on topics which are frequently raised by parents accessing our helpline and local services, more than two-thirds (**68.3%**) of respondents said improving social security benefits like Universal Credit was amongst their top three policy priorities (see Figure 10).⁴⁷

The second most commonly selected issue in respondents' top three was "ending the benefit cap" (**46.3%**), and the third was "for single parents to be valued and treated equally" (**29.3%**).

Taken together, childcare for school-age children (**25.4%**) and for under-fives (**15.1%**) was ranked in the top three priorities by two in five participants.

Figure 10: What policies should OPFS campaign on? (% who ranked these suggested issues among their top 3)



⁴⁷ n = 205

Single parents' calls for change

Throughout the survey and focus groups, participants were invited to tell us more about the changes they think could be made to improve the lives of single parents and their children.

Below is a representative selection of the range of proposals from participants on how to improve things for single parents in the areas explored by the research.

Cost of living

"The government need to step in with regards to fuel prices and energy prices. These companies are making massive profits while we all feel the pinch."

"More access to help with costs. Forcing businesses to pay better wages."

"Government assistance with cost of living in single parent families. Not just people on benefits. Child payments to single parent families."

"Find cheaper sustainable food resources, it's hard enough living on what feels like the poverty line without worrying how much the price of weekly/monthly shop has gone up."

Transport

"Better, cheaper and more reliable public transport, I would give up my car if this was the case."

"Govt needs to drive forward green strategies for home energy and fueling our cars - not just available to those with money."

"Public transport costs should either be reduced or those on Carers Allowance should receive free public transport without being with the one who is cared for."

Housing

"A better housing system would be better for everyone. More affordable housing, less profiteering from renting out properties, realistic rents that match the social security support available."

"More funds and opportunities for council housing."

"More housing would obviously help, however I think higher priority for those with disability is important."

"Cap on private rental properties. More help for single parents who would like to buy but can't afford to save the deposit."

"Help for people in rent arrears/struggling to pay and afford everything."

Debt

"Better help for people struggling with debt, that doesn't involve insolvency and long-term negative impact on credit score. Offering low interest debt consolidation loans that don't depend on having a good credit score."

“Affordable credit for unexpected big costs. I think that people on low incomes often must pay more for things through expensive loans or more expensive insurance. Making things more affordable and having better options to support families on a low income is important in protecting single parents from being pushed into problem debt.”

Employment

“I think the world of employment needs to change. More flexibility. (And not just working from home). Business and gov to recognise that part-time does not mean part-trained or only junior levels.”

“The Living Wage needs to be raised considerably as working families are hit the hardest with poverty.”

“Government schemes supporting single parents who are also carers to be able to work part-time (for their well-being to balance parental, caring role with a possibility of developing in other aspects of one’s life.”

“A four-day week would be a good thing to throw weight behind, it has proven benefits and for single parents it would be a massive help.”

Childcare

“More flexibility in how parents use free hours at council nurseries e.g., paying to top up hours. More affordable year-round school age childcare. School nurseries allowing nursery age kids to access out of school care if free hours not long enough.”

“Subsidies or financial support for childcare around school hours for working solo parents would make a huge difference.”

“My child’s school has a breakfast club and [after school service]. However, there’s no place for her due to capacity. Preferential places for single parents would help.”

“Understanding that children with additional needs have no provision or support and putting more funding in place to help support parents so they can earn and get much needed respite.”

Social security

“A better understanding and approach by the DWP and better training for those employed to work with people receiving benefits.”

“Put simply, increase the payments for those with young children who need to be at home more. Universal basic income would solve this in one stroke. Simplify the paperwork!”

“Less of an abrupt cliff edge for single parents moving to a better wage/full-time employment.”

“For the government to understand that some adults living with a disability are not able to be independent and that their family/carer needs financial support continuing beyond carers allowance (which is too low).”

Cost of the school day

“Allow some discretion when comes to help with clothing grants for example as I am just over the cut-off point per month to qualify. I struggle to get two uniforms and soon need to get a third for last child going to school. Also, this means I don’t qualify for bridging payment/school meals payment when kids off at holidays which would be a massive help.”

“School uniform should be provided by government for all children. Children have to go to school and so uniform should be provided at no cost to parent/carer. This would eliminate the stigma.”

“Make all trips free or next to nothing. School camp was £300, and my older son had France trip of £500. School offered help of paying half but absolutely hit me hard. You don’t want your child to miss out.”

“A less stringent uniform policy. At [my son’s] age, a lot of them aren't wanting to wear it and do their best not to it seems, so it's a lot of money for blazers they avoid wearing.”

Child maintenance

“The CMS [Child Maintenance Service] is broken, it’s not fit for purpose and is incompetent. The penalty fee for receiving parents receiving monies from Collect and Pay must be abolished, it’s grossly unfair.”

“CMS need to be overhauled in such a way that non-resident parent has to pay the correct rate for the child whither they think it acceptable or not. Also, a better system for those that play the system if self-employed or have a luxury lifestyle but claim no income to get out of paying.”

“When other parent won't pay any maintenance there should be another route for child to receive this help.”

Stigma and representation

“Equality is vital and I would like to see single people/parents as a protected characteristic against discrimination.”

“Stigma training. Not all single parents choose to parent on their own.”

“Children need to come first and the archaic narrative around marriage and 2.4 children being held up as the gold standard needs to be abolished. Families come in all sorts of configurations and that needs to be recognised more (without the stereotypes).”

“Single parent representation - we need to be in the places that decisions as made - but we can’t unless those places change.”

“As a single father I feel there is little visibility and catering for single dads in the single parent world.”

Other suggestions highlighted by participants included more support around **children’s mental health** and **parenting**:

“Mental health to be recognised as a reason for absence from school. Early intervention from support services.”

“Mental health support for kids affected by parental separation.”

“Providing parents with parenting classes, how [t]o support children’s mental health and wellbeing.”

Recommendations

We want to ensure single parents' role as sole carer and breadwinner is recognised, and work in partnership with parents to enable them to live free from discrimination and poverty so that they and their children can achieve their potential. The research findings discussed in this report make clear that for far too many single parent families in Scotland, this is still not the case.

Official statistics reveal that 39% of children in single parent families live in poverty⁴⁸, and through our consultation parents have told us that this situation is only getting worse. We believe that ending the inequality and poverty faced by single parent families should be an immediate policy priority for the UK, Scottish and local governments.

Based on what single parents have told us, we have identified the following key actions which each level of government should take now to improve the lives of single parent families.

UK Government

1. Introduce progressive tax measures to tackle inequality.

We support Oxfam's proposals on tax measures:⁴⁹

- An 'urgent pandemic excess profits tax' on the world's largest corporations of 90% on a temporary basis, to capture the windfall profits of corporations across all industries.
- Urgent one-off solidarity wealth taxes on new billionaire wealth to fund support for people facing rising energy and food costs.
- A permanent wealth tax on the richest in our society.

2. Tackle the immediate cost of living crisis for low-income families with emergency interventions.

- Benefits uprating should be brought forward from April 2023 to October 2022 to get ahead of price increases.
- The predicted average £2,800 rise in the cost of living to April 2023 means the £1,200 in core support committed so far to households on means tested benefits should be at least doubled. Higher payments should be given to households with higher needs and include legacy benefits recipients.⁵⁰
- Making debt deduction rates from benefits more affordable. Those subject to debt deductions face particularly high levels of hardship. Reduce the maximum cap on Universal Credit debt deductions from 25% to 15% and a maximum cap for state debt deductions at 5%.
- The benefit cap and two-child policies, which both limit the total amount of benefits a household can receive, should urgently be abolished.

⁴⁸ [Scottish Government \(2020\). Tackling child poverty: second year progress report.](#)

⁴⁹ [Oxfam- Profiting From Pain, Davos 2022](#)

⁵⁰ Calculated by [JRF](#) using ONS data and Bank of England forecasts.

- Introduce a new social tariff, a targeted discount energy deal for qualifying low-income consumers.⁵¹
- Government should work with energy suppliers to remove standing charges on pre-paid meters.

2. Introduce single parents' rights and protection from discrimination into law.

- Add single parents as the tenth protected characteristic to the Equality Act (2010).⁵²
- Confront the stereotypes portrayed about single parents in the media by communicating the facts.
- Ensure families of all types are valued and treated equally and fairly.
- Introduce family-friendly policies which support rather than penalise single parent families.

3. Invest in a social security system that prevents child poverty, treating single parent families with dignity and respect.

- Increase Universal Credit and legacy benefits in line with inflation. Every family should be able to afford the essentials.
- Make the following changes to Universal Credit:
 - remove the 5-week wait for benefits.
 - invest to improve poor DWP administration (particularly of childcare costs).
 - pay single parents aged under 25 the same rate as those aged over 25.
- Increase child benefit by at least £5 per week for each child to make up for inflation.
- Families should receive their full entitlement and not have amounts deducted due to the two-child limit, benefit cap or other deductions such as advance repayments or tax credit overpayments.
- End to job-seeking conditions for single parents with pre-school aged children.
- Replace sanctions with more emphasis on personalised support tailored for single parents.
- Raise the Local Housing Allowance to cover the average cost of private sector rents in an area.
- A return to single parent specialist advisers at Job Centre Plus would improve the journey for single parents.

4. Make childcare work for single parents.

- Extend Universal Credit to cover 100% of childcare costs, paid a month in advance to make it possible for parents to move into paid work.
- Cover the upfront costs of childcare through a deposit scheme.
- Extend childcare funding through UC to support parents undertaking training and education.

5. Support single parents into well paid, family friendly employment.

- Raise the national living wage to the level of the 'real Living Wage' and encourage more flexible, family friendly working.

⁵¹ [2022 Solving-the-cost-of-living-crisis_v02.pdf \(nea.org.uk\)](#)

⁵² [Single Parent Rights](#)

- Employment laws should support access to secure employment, with a mandatory real Living Wage and rights that fit in with family life, including greater control over working hours and arrangements.
- Require employers to consider flexible working requests at the point of recruitment.
- A family-focused employment strategy should recognise that full-time work is not always suitable or appropriate for all parents.
- Tackle low wage and insecure work, particularly in part-time and flexible roles which are often the best suited to parents with young children. This strategy should also ensure that paying parents the Living Wage is a mandatory obligation of all employers.

6. Make the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) fairer and fit for purpose.

- Remove the charges for receiving parents initially enrolling into and continuing to use the Collect and Pay service.
- Improving the service for survivors of domestic abuse.
- Stronger systems and resources to challenge parents who avoid child maintenance and those who do not pay what has been agreed.
- Better customer service for parents and improved case management by the CMS.
- Introduce a full root and branch review of the child maintenance service.
- Making up any shortfall in child maintenance not being paid by non-resident parents and guarantee payment without impacting on Universal Credit or the Benefit Cap.

Scottish Government

1. Provide support to reduce household costs and increase income to help families meet their basic needs during the cost of living crisis.

- Double the planned “bridging payments” for families with children aged 6 to 12 in receipt of free school meals from £130 to £260, reflecting the fact that the Scottish Child Payment for children under 6 has now been doubled.
- The Scottish Government’s Child poverty Delivery Plan identifies 6 priority groups as they have highest poverty levels. Immediate support should be given to families in priority groups who have higher living costs or are given lesser support through the UK social security system: families with a disabled child; those with 3+ children⁵³; and families with a parent aged under 25.⁵⁴
- The Scottish Government should work to influence energy providers in Scotland to focus on debt write-offs or bill support for families in the 6 priority groups and pre-payment meter users who face higher costs and the risk of self-disconnection.
- All publicly funded services should address the cost of living crisis as core to their work. Funders should enable services to use budgets to help families out of crisis as a legitimate part of their work.

2. Invest further in Scotland’s social security benefits and payments to lift more families out of poverty.

⁵³ [Tackling Child Poverty and Destitution: Next Steps For The Scottish Child Payment and the Scottish Welfare Fund](#)

⁵⁴ Scottish Government (2022). [Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan Fourth Year Progress Report \(2021-22\) Focus report on households with mothers aged 25 or under.](#)

- Recognise the higher levels of poverty amongst priority families such as those with a mother aged under 25, three or more children, single parents, and families with a disabled person in the household, and consider the introduction of targeted supplementary amounts through the Scottish Child Payment.
- Mitigate the unfair two-child limit and lower rate of payment for parents under 25 in Universal Credit (the young parent penalty) by targeting support through the Scottish Child Payment.
- The new Scottish Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods are an efficient and effective way to get money to families with young children. Their value should be increased in line with inflation.
- Increase the Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) budget and direct local authorities to urgently target additional funds towards those affected by the benefit cap so that it is fully mitigated.
- Introduce the new Scottish Carers Assistance payment in line with inflation predictions and raise the qualifying earnings limit to ensure that carers can work at least 16 hours at National Living Wage. Pay a double Carer's Allowance Supplement payment in 2022, as provided in 2021. Reform Scottish Carer's Assistance to better support people to care, including those in employment or education.
- Maximise uptake of Best Start Grants, Best Start Food Grant, Disability Benefits, and the Scottish Child Payment.
- Introduce radical reform of the Scottish Welfare Fund which provides a much-needed lifeline for families. In the short-term, additional resourcing should be allocated along with refreshed guidance to ensure all those eligible to apply for support are aware of and can access the fund.
- In the longer-term, aim to provide everyone in Scotland with a minimum acceptable standard of living – a Minimum Income Guarantee.

3. Tackle the cost of the school day by expanding support for families through free school meals and clothing grants.

- Cash payments, when in lieu of school meals, should be paid at the same level to parents across Scotland.
- Provide School Clothing Grants to low-income families that meet the real cost of school clothes.
- Free school meals and school clothing grants should be made available to all families on Universal Credit and legacy benefits.
- Provide the funds to local authorities to cancel all school meals debt.
- In the longer term, expanding the programme to include all primary and secondary pupils.

4. Invest in a 'Fair Start for Single Parents' employability support, recognising that single parents face gendered structural barriers to entering, sustaining, and progressing in paid work.

- Provide significant increases in funding for the Parental Employment Support Fund (PESF)⁵⁵ to make the progress needed to meet Scotland's statutory targets on child poverty.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ [Parental Employability Support Fund \(PESF\)](#)

⁵⁶ [Child Poverty \(Scotland\) Act 2017 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

- Introduce an equivalent to the Youth Guarantee⁵⁷ for parents from the Child Poverty Delivery Plan priority family groups⁵⁸ engaging with programmes supported by PESF. This should offer a guarantee of work (with a wage subsidy provided if necessary) or funded training or further education. It should also include support with childcare if needed.
- Scotland's devolved employment support services⁵⁹ should offer bespoke initiatives for single parents to move into, stay and advance in employment such as a Scotland-wide employability pathway specifically for single parents.⁶⁰
- Those in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment should be proactively supported to access parental employment support, should they need it.
- Support the public sector to create more quality, flexible vacancies (flexible in terms of offering hours that suit single parents; quality in terms of protecting them from poverty), directly and through procurement and economic development.
- Support employers in the private sector to create more quality, flexible vacancies.
- Living wage and living hours policies are vital for single parents with links to a 'minimum income guarantee'.
- New opportunities will become available - green jobs etc. A greater focus is needed on ensuring women are being equipped to access these roles.
- Work with employers to reduce inflexibility and judgemental attitudes towards single parents which is locking them out of jobs and opportunities.

5. Ensure single parents are not excluded from further and higher education.

- Reflect the distinct needs of students who are single parents in the Scottish Government's Adult Learning Strategy.⁶¹
- Recognise that there are practical challenges of limited time, money, Job Centre Plus conditionality requirements and access to childcare for single parents and ensure a joined-up approach across different government departments to increase single parents access to further education.
- Tackle the barriers to education facing single parents: a lack information about where to start, funding available, choosing the correct course, and the financial impacts that entering education will have for them, including the impact on benefits.
- Provide fully funded opportunities for single parents to attain their first level 3 qualification, prior to their return to paid work and for those already in work.
- Employability Programme providers should undertake early assessment of single parents of the need for skills training; this should include the need for intermediate vocational training, not just basic skills and employability support.
- Employability Programme providers should guarantee to fully fund childcare costs for single parents undertaking their first level 3 qualifications.

⁵⁷ [Delivering the Youth Guarantee - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

⁵⁸ [Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022 to 2026 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

⁵⁹ [Employability in Scotland | Supporting the employability sector in Scotland](http://www.gov.scot)

⁶⁰ [If not now, when? - Social Renewal Advisory Board report: January 2021](http://www.gov.scot)

⁶¹ [Adult learning strategy 2022 to 2027 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

- Work with further education institutions to support expansion of the provision of on-site nursery places that open before class start time to allow students to have affordable, practical childcare and focus on their learning.

6. Implement with speed a childcare delivery plan which provides flexible, affordable, high quality early years, school age and holiday childcare.

- Implement the call by the Social Renewal Advisory Board that Scottish Government should set out a radical childcare ambition for this parliamentary term.⁶²
- Work towards an entitlement to 50 hours per week of funded, good quality, flexible education, and childcare for all children between six months and five years.
- Urgent work should be carried out on how childcare can be provided more flexibly, alongside a funded or subsidised out of school care entitlement to develop an integrated childcare offer from 0-12 years.
- In the longer term every child up to the age of 12 (and in some cases beyond 12) should be entitled to up to 50 hours of high-quality childcare and education per week throughout the year.^{63 64}
- An integrated childcare offer should also include provision that meets the needs of disabled children and children with Additional Support Needs.

7. Take action to address the digital exclusion faced by low-income families.

- Ensure support packages for priority families to build skills, knowledge, and confidence in using digital technology.
- Encourage the telecommunications industry to lift the data caps on a pay-as-you-go and rolling pay monthly tariff.
- Make mobile 'hot spots' available free of use and accessible to all.
- Priority needs to be given to helping families achieve free digital access and access to digital devices, especially where children do not have access to a laptop or broadband.

8. Ensure that integrated national and local policies support family wellbeing to help tackle child poverty and to achieve Scottish Government targets.

- Ensure mainstream investment in services and programmes focus on the six priority family groups in the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan.⁶⁵
- To Keep the Promise,⁶⁶ public services should work with families to deliver support in an integrated and holistic way that ensures they receive the support they need, when they need it and where it is easiest for them to access.
- All statutory services should embed poverty awareness and offer guidance on income maximisation.

⁶² [If not now, when? - Social Renewal Advisory Board report: January 2021 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-renewal-advisory-board-report-2021/pages/100-to-150.aspx)

⁶³ [Children in Scotland Commission for Childcare Reform](https://www.gov.scot/publications/children-in-scotland-commission-for-childcare-reform/pages/100-to-150.aspx)

⁶⁴ [First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls 2020 Report and Recommendations](https://www.gov.scot/publications/first-minister-national-advisory-council-on-women-and-girls-2020-report-and-recommendations/pages/100-to-150.aspx)

⁶⁵ [Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022 to 2026 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/best-start-bright-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-to-2026/pages/100-to-150.aspx)

⁶⁶ [The Promise Scotland: What is The Promise?](https://www.gov.scot/publications/the-promise-scotland-what-is-the-promise/pages/100-to-150.aspx)

- Increase investment in services for vulnerable children up to 18 and their parents. If parents do not get support with increased domestic abuse, mental health issues and substance abuse levels this will lead to more family relationships breaking down and more children ending up in care.
- Develop a whole family 'Financial Inclusion Pathway' which enables support at transitions and explores and addresses the financial implications of young people being taken into care or returning from care.
- Statutory services and funders should recognise that specialist single parent tailored family support is an essential part of wider provision and provide sufficient funding to specialist organisations working with priority family groups.

9. Ensure every child lives in a decent, secure, affordable, and warm home.

- Recognise longer-term, stable, and affordable housing needs to be a cornerstone of policy for reducing poverty.
- Enable single parent families to have a long-term decent home by investing in social housing.
- Stronger laws to ensure there is a right to a safe, secure, and affordable home and an end no-fault evictions.
- Everyone should have access to information on their housing rights and how to get advice to ensure they are applied in practice.
- While the Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party Shared Policy Programme has a welcome commitment to deliver rent controls by the end of 2025, this must be brought forward.
- Domestic abuse is the leading cause of homelessness for women. Financial abuse by an ex-partner is a huge issue for single parents and especially for young mothers. This should be more of a crosscutting theme in housing policy and in the work to address child poverty.

10. Ensure the public transport system works for single parent families.

- Extend free bus travel to everyone receiving Universal Credit and other low-income benefits to remove a real barrier to work, education and childcare.
- Provide free travel passes for children living in low-income families to travel to school.
- The infrastructure, timetables (regularity and routing) of public transport should be responsive to families' needs. For example, improvements around regularity linked to school timetables and routes from home to childcare then onto further education or work for parents.
- The training of public transport staff (particularly bus drivers) should include single parent awareness.
- Design of buses and trains for people getting on and off with prams and small children should be improved.
- Improve the availability of low-cost travel to cheaper supermarkets for low-income families living in non-urban areas.
- In the longer term introduce re-regulation – controlling routes and fares and fund councils to establish municipal bus services which re-invest profits back into the service and lower

fares.⁶⁷

11. Raise increased finances through devolved taxes.

- Since 2017, the Scottish Parliament has had the ability to set income tax rates and bands, apart from the personal allowance. We recommend that the government make progressive use of these taxes to fund public services.
- We also support IPPR's¹ call for radical reform of council tax to make it fairer and to raise extra finance for public services.

12. Gather and publish evidence more effectively of how the Child Poverty Delivery Plan impacts on targets set to reduce child poverty in lone parent families.

- Progress a greater understanding of and gather data on the likely impact of the actions on child poverty in lone parent families and use this to identify what further action is needed.
- Single parents' experience is not homogenous – they are affected by overlapping and interdependent issues such as gender, race, socio-economic background, sexuality and disability. The cumulative impact of this should be reflected in data collection and resulting policy interventions.
- Most single parents are women, therefore the use of gender-sensitive, sex-disaggregated data across policy interventions would contribute to the measurement of impact of policy on single parents.
- The data that is being collected about single parents should inform and improve policy development and service delivery across government functions.

13. Involve 'experts by experience' in policies that affect them.

- Government at all levels should recognise the diversity of families, including 'single parent proofing', when implementing policy and designing services.
- If we listen to and involve parents, then their direct evidence of experience highlights new issues and new connections. A 'single parent proofed' initiative is a family proofed initiative.

Local authorities

1. Recognise that single parents and their children face systemic discrimination across all areas of life and ensure local services treat single parents with dignity and respect.

Actions

- Single parents are not recognised as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010 at a national level.^{68 69} However local authorities should recognise the challenges faced

⁶⁷ [Our-Buses briefing.pdf \(stuc.org.uk\)](#)

⁶⁸ [Single Parent Rights](#)

⁶⁹ [Equality Act 2010: guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

by single parents in their role as sole carers and breadwinners for their children and put in place positive single parent tailored services.

- Ensure local authority schools put in place policies which are sensitive to children in single parent families.

2. Plan to tackle child poverty with a clear focus on the Child Poverty Delivery Plan priority families.

Actions

- Establish clear outcomes and indicators to measure progress in tackling child poverty in the six priority families.
- Align Local Child Poverty Action Plans with Employability Delivery Plans and Childcare plans including shared consistent actions and measures.
- Ensure data from all employability programmes is disaggregated by parent/non-parent and by the child poverty priority groups.
- Information and services should be proactively targeted at low-income parents, particularly those in the priority groups.
- Ensure ongoing involvement of parents in the priority groups with lived experience of poverty in service design and delivery.
- Embed a 'whole systems, person-centred' approach to child poverty and parental employability including family support and the availability and affordability of transport, childcare and housing.
- Engage with and support public and private sector employers at local level to provide flexible, well-paid employment opportunities and routes to upskilling and career progression that are accessible to single parents.

3. Ensure access to an adequate supply of affordable, secure, good quality family housing considering the needs of single parent families.

Actions

- Ensure an adequate supply of affordable, secure, good quality family housing.
- Work with Scottish Government to implement initiatives to bring down rents to a genuinely affordable level particularly in the private rented sector.
- Expand and improve early person-centred advice and advocacy services to prevent homelessness, including providing income maximisation and debt advice.

4. Deliver and fund a single parent tailored employability pathway and support 'fair work' employment opportunities for single parents.

Actions

- Work with Local Employability Partnerships to provide an improved employability offer to parents identified as a priority in the Child Poverty Delivery Plan - providing tailored provision through a dedicated keyworker and support to access childcare and transport as well as to training, education, and sustainable well-paid jobs.
- Address low pay for local authority employees, including female dominated sectors such as social care and childcare.
- Focus on integrating gender equality and women's experiences of employment into labour market and economic development policymaking.

- Ensuring that all economic development investment is assessed for its potential impact on child poverty. The jobs that are created should be high quality and paid at least the real Living Wage.

5. Use local powers to deliver more cash support to families and build on experience of ensuring a dignified cash-first approach to income crises.

Actions

- Single parents in crisis without food or heating need a same day decision and payment of Crisis Grants from the Scottish Welfare Fund.
- Ensuring that all agencies that refer to food banks are supported to explore all other options, including the Scottish Welfare Fund, before resorting to a food bank referral.
- Prioritising embedding welfare rights and income maximisation work across public facing services.
- Use discretionary housing payments (DHPs) to mitigate the benefit cap.

6. Improve access to high quality, free childcare which offers a flexible model to meet the need of working parents.

Actions

- Ensure that the 1140 hours of funded childcare is sufficiently flexible to meet parents' needs.
- Ensure parents of disabled children have equal access to affordable and appropriate childcare.
- Recognise childcare as vital infrastructure investment in local economic development strategies.
- Support the development of wraparound childcare and expansion of early learning and childcare to one-and-two-year-olds as early priorities.
- Ensure that out of school and holiday care is affordable and available.

7. Tackle the cost of the school day.

Actions

- Implement automatic payment of school clothing grants and delivery of free school meal entitlement to remove barriers to application and improve uptake.
- Invest in advice workers in schools to ensure families are accessing all the financial support they are entitled to.
- Roll out free, healthy school meals to P6s and P7s as soon as possible.
- Take action to roll out free school meals beyond the statutory requirement, in the first instance to all pupils in families in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent legacy benefits.
- Cancel all school meals debt.

8. Invest in holistic family support and develop a 'Supporting Families Strategy'.

Local councils' investment in holistic family support is vital to fully realise the vision set out by The Promise.

Actions

- In response to the cost of living crisis, ensure families have their basic needs met.
- All departments in the council should 'single parent proof' their policies.
- Embed intensive and individualised family support services in communities where families are trying to deal with complex and traumatic life experiences such as parental separation, addiction, domestic abuse, and homelessness.
- In working with families, use a strength-based model to achieve family wellbeing.

Conclusion

The findings from our consultation provide a shocking snapshot of the crisis currently facing so many low-income single parent families, as well as the deep-seated, long-term challenges which have only been intensified by rising living costs. Not eating properly or not at all, losing out on social connections, and poor health are just some of the difficulties single parents and their children are experiencing.

The issues described by the parents who participated in this research don't exist in isolation. One Parent Families Scotland will continue to campaign to highlight that the issues facing single parents are not inevitable but caused by structural disadvantages and inequality.

No child or adult living in a single parent household should ever have to choose between a nutritious meal or heating their home. We will push for joined up policy coherence across cost of living strategies, employment, employability, childcare, social security, housing, family support and healthcare so that single parents and their children are not left behind.

Every aspect of families' lives and the communities they live in have been affected by Covid-19, which has heightened stark disparities between disadvantaged children and young people and their peers.

Child poverty is now costing the UK an estimated £38 billion a year.⁷⁰ The latest Scottish Government progress report on its Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan highlighted that significant progress needs to be achieved in the years ahead to deliver the 2030 targets.⁷¹

We know poverty is not inevitable. Policy interventions have successfully reduced poverty, particularly amongst children and pensioners. Between the mid-1990s and early 2010s child poverty in Scotland fell from 33% of all children to 19%.⁷²

We will continue to lobby for Government policies which go beyond generic offerings to meet the specific issues and concerns facing single parent families. The voices of single parents in crisis need to be truly listened to and acted upon so that cost of living strategies are outcome focused and co-produced.

Paid and Unpaid care – which brings vast social and economic benefits – must be at the forefront of policy and spending at Scottish Government and local authority levels. The urgency has never been greater for radical action to value care in the way it should be, so we are proud to work along with Oxfam Scotland, Carers Scotland, Scottish Women’s Budget Group and Scottish Care in calling for a ‘National Outcome’ on valuing and investing in care and all those who provide it, whether paid or unpaid.⁷³

As society moves out of the trauma of the Covid-19 pandemic there will be ongoing debate on the development on a Scottish Green New Deal, a wellbeing economy, affordable housing, integrated transport, and an early years and school age childcare framework that meets needs of all parents and children. The pandemic has shown the vital role of collective ‘universal basic services’ in providing security to families. In the longer term Universal Basic Services should be expanded into new areas such as care, housing, digital and transport.⁷⁴

British researchers Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett show a correlation between income inequality and higher rates of health and social problems (obesity, mental illness, homicides, teenage births, incarceration, child conflict, drug use).⁷⁵ Our response as a society will require radical structural change as well as a recognition of inequality and the need for redistribution of income and wealth.

OPFS will work with single parents to ensure they are able to participate, and that their voices are heard in these discussions. We will continue to champion positive change with single parents and their children to ensure that they receive the respect and dignity they are entitled to, and that their basic human rights are fully realised.

⁷⁰ [The Cost of Child Poverty in 2021 CRSP Paper.pdf \(lboro.ac.uk\)](#)

⁷¹ [Scottish Government \(2021\) Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan Fourth Year Progress Report](#)

⁷² [Child Poverty Action Group \(CPAG\) in Scotland evidence Scottish Affairs Committee: Welfare in Scotland inquiry.](#)

⁷³ <https://ascotlandthatcares.org/>

⁷⁴ [The Case for Universal Basic Services \(politybooks.com\)](#)

⁷⁵ [The Spirit Level | The Equality Trust](#)