



# Single Parent Families Impact Report

Issue 19  
Food affordability  
September 2022



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

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# Introduction

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

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

There are five elements to the model:

- Gathering knowledge: Parent's experience is systematically collected and analysed.
- Monitoring Emerging Issues: Emerging issues are drawn out and highlighted.
- OPFS Response: Our services respond by working to meet the needs identified.
- Dissemination and Communication: Emerging issues communicated to key influencers.
- Single Parent Proofing: Using single parent feedback to inform the development, implementation and evaluation of policy and practice so that they respond effectively to the needs of single parents.

The report is organised into three broad categories. These reflect the topics single parents contact us about:

1. Health and wellbeing
2. Social security benefits
3. Money and family income

# Main findings

## Health and Wellbeing

Cost of living pressures are significantly impacting on single parents' mental health and wellbeing. Good mental health is at risk when financial resources are at breaking point and money is a constant concern. The insights and descriptions of the challenges they face paints a picture of single parents' daily struggles and the sacrifices they make for their children.



*My daughter is autistic and sees her dad alternative weekends but the rest of the time it is just her and I. I struggle to meet up with other parents and friends because of my daughter's needs. I feel very lonely.*



*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.*



*Parents are anxious, depressed and overwhelmed with money worries." – OPFS family support worker.*

Our latest report, [Living Without a Lifeline: Single parenting and the cost of living crisis](#) highlights the current challenges parents are facing and the negative health outcomes they are experiencing, often directly linked to their financial hardship.

Our spotlight topic for this month, [Food Affordability](#) (see below), shows that mental health is particularly affected when we look at the issue of food affordability.

Among those who participated in the [Living Without a Lifeline<sup>1</sup>](#) report, nearly 84% of those who were finding it extremely difficult or impossible to afford food said they had felt anxious, stressed, or struggled with their mental health most of the time over the past year. This compared to 34.9% among parents who said they were either finding it easy or 'more difficult' (but not extremely so) to afford food. These are stark statistics and in a modern society this is a shocking revelation.

1 <https://opfs.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policy-research/living-without-a-lifeline/>

## Social Security Benefits

Parents continually tell us that they have insufficient money to meet daily costs because of inadequate benefit levels.



*I never have enough money, by the time I've paid my bills...*



*Benefits are not increasing enough in line with inflation. They need to be increased in accordance with the cost of living.*

The complexity of the benefit system, which does little to alleviate their financial problems, is of particular concern.



*The stress of knowing that I will have to eventually move over to Universal Credit fills me with dread... it is a constant cycle of worry and stress*

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. The impact of 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.<sup>2</sup>

We strongly recommend that the UK government raises benefits to match the rate of inflation and thus improve the standard for those living in low-income households.

## Money and family income

The quality of social life, activity and the extent of our community ties has a direct impact on our emotional and physical health. Over the period of August and September, which this report covers, parents had already started thinking about Christmas. They stressed about the additional strain placed on already cash strapped and fragile household budgets. The same anxieties were expressed for holidays and other meaningful activities.



*Parents already asking about the cost of Christmas - how are they going to cope as they have no spare money at all for gifts. This makes them feel hopeless. - Helpline adviser*



*Not able to consider any holiday this year as my monthly money leaves almost nothing after council tax and heating costs each month...I haven't bought myself any new clothes for ages, knowing that my youngest teenager regularly needs shoes/clothes as they grow.*

Money concerns for single parents are wide ranging, but are linked in a complex web of pressures, barriers and demands which impact families to varying degrees. This is forcefully expressed in financial loss and inequality. Parents during August and September continue to articulate the emotional and social implications for their day-to-day living.



*I feel I am depressed with the cost of living as I am not sleeping and feel overwhelmed all the time. When is it going to end?*



*Cost of food rising means I'm eating my children's leftovers to save cooking an extra meal. I work full time and it's all still a struggle.*

## Spotlighted topic: Food affordability

Our recent research<sup>3</sup> demonstrates that many single parent families are struggling to fulfil even the most basic of human rights, for example, feeding children, in a climate of rising costs. Many parents have told us that they need to use food banks for help. That is simply unacceptable in a country as prosperous as Scotland<sup>4</sup>.

A recent report<sup>5</sup> found that thousands of children have been treated for malnutrition in Scottish hospitals. In Glasgow, a third of children are estimated to be living in poverty with hospital admissions for malnutrition almost doubling from 572 last year to a 1000.

These figures highlight just how vital it is that government at all levels act with urgency to ensure that families have a decent income, whether through paid work or social security support, that they need to give their children a healthy diet.

The Scottish Human Rights Commission also reminds us that the right to food is a basic right. They refer to:

- Availability - food should be available for sale in markets and shops.
- Accessibility - food must be affordable. People should be able to afford food for an adequate diet without compromising on any other basic needs, such as school fees, medicines or rent. Physical accessibility means that food should be accessible to all, including people who are physically vulnerable.
- Adequacy - food must satisfy dietary needs. Food should be safe for human consumption and free from contaminants including residues from pesticides, hormones, or veterinary drugs. Adequate food should also be culturally acceptable so religious and cultural taboos must be accommodated<sup>6</sup>.

The Scottish Government says it is committed to tackling malnutrition and helping families on low incomes as detailed in their Child Poverty Plan<sup>7</sup>:



*We are taking immediate steps to put cash in the pockets of families – tackling the cost-of-living crisis and helping to lift thousands of children out of poverty in Scotland.*

*Our national mission to tackle child poverty is already giving more children the best start and a bright future. We are determined to meet our ambitious targets set for 2023-24 and 2030 and beyond, so that no children in Scotland are living in poverty. We know there is not a silver bullet, and this cannot be done overnight.*

3 [opfs.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policy-research/living-without-a-lifeline/](https://opfs.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policy-research/living-without-a-lifeline/)

4 [scottish-government-response-un-food-insecurity-poverty](https://www.scottishgovernment.gov.uk/scottish-government-response-un-food-insecurity-poverty)

5 [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-62940236](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-62940236)

6 <https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/our-law-and-policy-work/right-to-food/>

7 <https://www.gov.scot/news/tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-26>

The issues described by single parents during the months of August and September are the consequence of the impact of the increasing cost of living crisis, combined with the precarious circumstances already faced by so many single parent families in or on the edges of poverty. Not eating properly, losing out on social connections or not being able to pay energy costs are just some of the difficulties they are experiencing.

In relation to food poverty and malnutrition, OPFS will continue to campaign for policy action to put money in the pockets of low-income families. Poverty is not inevitable but caused by structural issues which government policy can change. Parents and children should never have to choose between maintaining good health, having a nutritious meal, or heating their home.

## Recommended action

Low-income single parents require the means to pay for nutritious food for their families, to have easier access to free school meals, and the necessary support to combat the risk of child malnutrition.

Access to food should be a legal right and one that is enshrined in Scots law.

- The UK Government should raise social security benefits in line with inflation to mitigate further entrenching of poverty.
- The Scottish Government should ensure through legislation that food is always available, accessible and of adequate quality to avoid malnutrition and poor health outcomes.
- Local authorities should work closely with Scottish Government and the third sector to ensure that the barriers which lead to diet-related illnesses are identified and addressed if we are to achieve a healthy nation with dignity and respect for all. This would include such things as promoting free school meals and eliminating joining fees for food banks.

## Conclusion

Feedback from single parents during the period of August and September continues to reflect the theme of grinding poverty, with food affordability a major concern. Parents work tirelessly and selflessly to do the best for their families during these difficult times, even going without themselves to provide the basics for their children.

However, in some households, missing meals has become a standard practice. As an organisation we will continue to lobby for Government policies which incorporate the lived experiences of single parents to eradicate poverty and inequality.

Most people who fall into food poverty struggle because their income is too low or unreliable. This can be caused by low wages, an ineffective social security system and benefit sanctions, which make it difficult to cover rent, fuel, and food costs. 'Food poverty' is just one symptom of a wider injustice: poverty. It is not only food that children and their families cannot afford. It is heating, lighting, shelter, winter clothes, toiletries.

As a society we must ensure all are given the dignity of being able to afford the essentials. But it is Government and our elected officials that have the power to act.



# One Parent Families Scotland

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