



# **Making The Difference**

**The impact of One Parent Families Scotland's Glasgow service on single parents and children**

**A report by Colin Duff  
Winning Words**



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# Introduction

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) is a national charity which aims to enable single parent families to achieve their potential, to reach a decent standard of living, and to contribute to Scottish society.

OPFS delivery is arranged in geographic units, each of which has developed a set of services, management culture and approach to delivery in response to local circumstances, needs and opportunities. OPFS Glasgow has evolved a distinctive and unique model of service provision that is informed by a deep and detailed understanding of specific needs of single parents, their circumstances and the kind of supports they require.

Although there is a diverse offer available from OPFS Glasgow, all provision is designed to present a seamless and holistic experience for single parents, leading to the best possible outcomes for single parents and families, regardless of the focus of the service or the priorities of funders and sponsors.

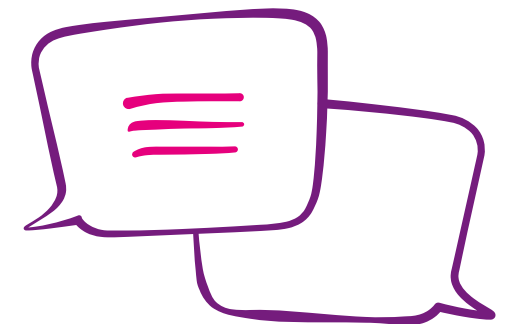
Single parents engaging with OPFS Glasgow report a more positive experience than with other agencies, achieve the objectives they wanted to achieve more immediately, continue to engage with the service following the resolution of their immediately presenting problem, and achieve greater and more sustainable outcomes for themselves and their children, including outcomes associated with child poverty<sup>1</sup>.



The primary task for this evaluation is to describe how OPFS Glasgow achieves accelerated and more sustainable outcomes for single parent families.

The report is titled 'MAKING THE DIFFERENCE' because it describes both the difference that OPFS Glasgow makes to single parents and the features and factors of the OPFS Glasgow approach which make the difference between the approach taken by OPFS Glasgow and how single parents describe their experiences of working with other agencies.

The research for this report was undertaken by Collin Duff. Colin has been an independent consultant for more than 20 years, specialising in evaluation and supporting organisations to build capacity for evaluation and to use evaluation evidence to influence policy and practise. He also has extensive experience of intervention design, project/business planning and Third sector governance and management. He has worked with One Parent Families Scotland on several evaluations.



<sup>1</sup> See the Scottish Government 'Child poverty drivers, outcomes and theory of change' document published here - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-poverty-strategy-documents/>





## The evaluation

In recent years, OPFS Glasgow has seen an unprecedented increase in demand for support from single parents. This has happened at a time of significant change to welfare benefits and a substantial priority being placed on addressing child poverty from Scottish Government, Glasgow City Council and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. This has led to enhanced partnerships between OPFS Glasgow and the public sector due to their shared interests in reducing child poverty in single parent families.

As a result of these convergent factors, it is now an appropriate time for OPFS Glasgow to reflect on the strengths of their present model of service provision and to consider how the organisation is positioned to make the greatest difference, in partnership with Glasgow City Council and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, to single parents and families in Glasgow in the coming years.

Earlier evaluations of individual OPFS Glasgow services have observed how the holistic operational model and working culture in OPFS Glasgow can generate greater and more sustained outcomes for single parents, families and children.

This evaluation is intended to further explore this observation across the whole of the OPFS Glasgow suite of services, to build on the evidence base for the observation, and to offer conclusions on the features and factors which enable OPFS Glasgow to deliver better outcomes for parents, families and children.<sup>2,3</sup>

A further aim of the evaluation is to describe how OPFS Glasgow supports single parents to participate in creating change at practice and policy level both locally and nationally.

The report from this evaluation describes the evidence for the impact of the OPFS Glasgow model of provision on levels of poverty, including child poverty, and how services, approaches, staff skills and organisational culture mesh together to provide a better experience for parents, and to deliver outcomes more swiftly and with greater sustainability.

<sup>2</sup> Mental Health and Wellbeing Service Evaluation, One Parent Families Scotland, CD Associates, August 2020

<sup>3</sup> Evaluation of One Parent Families Scotland Practitioner Advice Service, One Parent Families Scotland, CD Associates, August 2018



# Methodology

The research evidence which informed the conclusions in this report has been gathered through:

- A desk based review of the scope and range of OPFS Glasgow services.
- Interviews with staff involved in managing, delivering and reporting on OPFS Glasgow services.
- Interviews with staff responsible for policy and influencing work on behalf of OPFS and single parents.
- Meetings with Glasgow City Council staff with responsibility for financial inclusion and child poverty work.
- Focus groups and interviews with single parents.
- Analysis of a sample of the records of OPFS Glasgow interventions made with single parents.





# Single parent outcome inequalities

Single parenthood has numerous challenges. Together, these produce a unique combination of factors which compound the disadvantage that single parents and their children live with. Working effectively and supportively with single parents demands services which are based on a detailed and deep understanding of this unique experience and practitioners who can demonstrate understanding of and empathy with the circumstances and experiences of single parents.

Single parents, by definition, are the sole care giver in a family and have responsibility for all the roles that may otherwise be undertaken by two parents working together. They do not benefit from the parenting and mutual personal support that can be available from co-parenting. Single parents are also, by default, the main earner in the family, but have less time to devote to performing in this role. The demands of childcare can mean that opportunities for employment, training and education are limited. Single parents have to balance the roles of sole care giver and main breadwinner. The higher rates of unemployment, underemployment and low income in single parent families suggest that single parenthood has a negative impact on the breadwinner role.

Around a quarter of families in Scotland are headed by single parents, with that figure expected to rise over the next 25 years. Some neighbourhoods in Glasgow have disproportionately higher rates of single parenthood in comparison to the national average.

The Glasgow Indicators Project<sup>4</sup> reports that nine out of ten single parents are female, that their average age is 38, that one third have a disability or longstanding illness and that a similar proportion have a child with a disability.

The Indicators Project further reports that:

- Most single parents are in paid employment but are less likely to be in work compared with married or co-habiting parents.
- Glasgow has one of the lowest single parent employment rates (50%) among Scottish local authorities.
- Among those in paid work, single parents are much more likely to work part-time.
- Children in single parent families are at twice the risk of experiencing relative poverty when compared with children in couple families (41% compared to 24%).
- The overwhelming majority of single parents are women.

- Single parent families face the biggest losses as a result of recent welfare reforms, losing on average around £1,800 a year.

The reform of UK Government welfare policy has been found to disproportionately affect single parents<sup>5</sup>. The introduction of Universal Credit includes an in-work conditionality which means that individuals and those in low income households must do all they can to increase their earnings.

Increasing working hours and hourly earnings can help reduce in-work poverty for single parents. However, this may be difficult to achieve due to wider changes in the labour market, e.g. the increase in the use of zero hour contracts and people working part-time but unable to increase their hours or find a full-time job.

“My adviser helped me to work everything out, which I just couldn't have done on my own, I even got help with my upfront childcare costs so that I could go into part time employment.”

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.understandingglasgow.com/lone\\_parents](https://www.understandingglasgow.com/lone_parents)

<sup>5</sup> Impact of UK Welfare Policy on Families with Children, Scottish Government, September 2017.

# About OPFS Glasgow

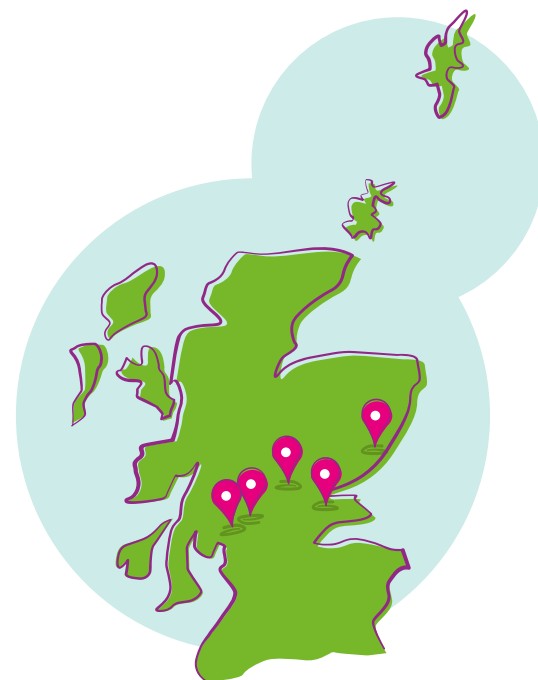
OPFS works across Scotland through a number of geographically targeted units of which Glasgow is the largest in terms of staffing, number of clients, income and range of provision. Despite ongoing funding challenges, OPFS Glasgow has significantly expanded and diversified services in recent years.

Over the same period that OPFS Glasgow has expanded and diversified, there has been a rise in demand from single parents for OPFS Glasgow services. This has correlated with a period in which there have been changes in welfare benefits and a rise in the cost of living which have contributed to increasing levels of poverty and hardship for single parent families.

Single parents are disproportionately represented in the profile of families affected by child poverty and are therefore a priority group for interventions intended to reduce child poverty.

This has led to an increase in the importance of OPFS Glasgow as a contributor to targets for reducing child poverty in Glasgow and as a partner in the development, design and delivery of action to achieve these reductions.

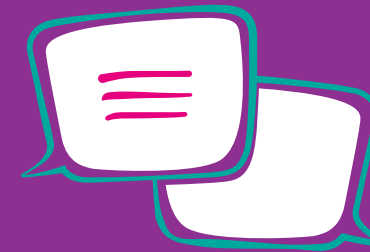
OPFS Glasgow covers the entire Glasgow City Council area – from Castlemilk in the South to Springburn and Robroyston in the North, from Easterhouse in the East to Pollok and Drumchapel in the West. Services are delivered from premises in central Glasgow, which are also the office headquarters for staff.



A variety of community based premises are used for the delivery of outreach services and to promote the availability of support.

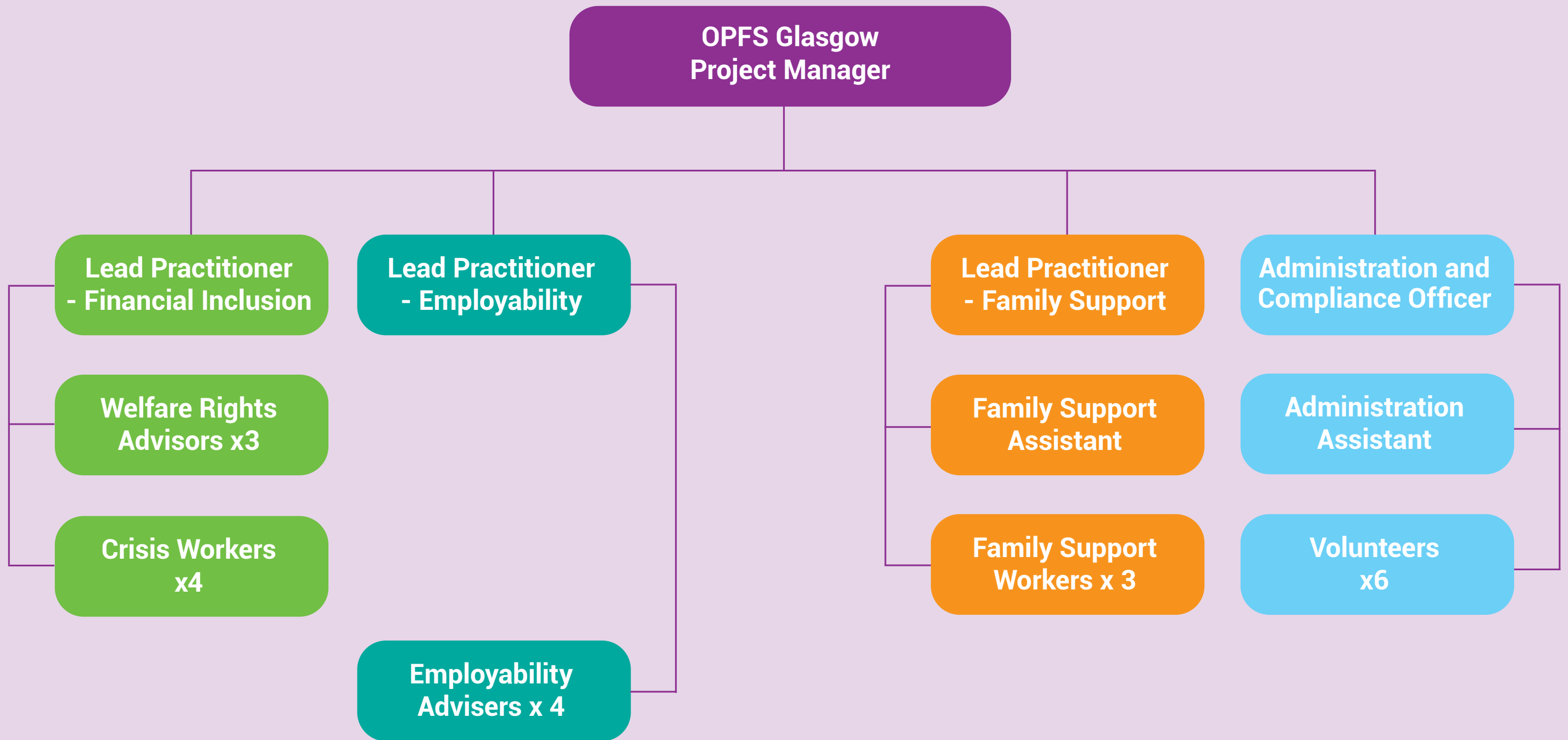
## The OPFS Glasgow suite of services includes:

- Crisis support for single parents which takes a trauma-informed and strengths-based approach.
- Family support for single parents which includes advice, information and practical support with a focus on family wellbeing, including Early Intervention, parenting and family support for young parents.
- Counselling for parents with low to medium mental wellbeing issues, including the impact of trauma.
- Income maximisation, welfare benefits, debt and money advice with a focus on achieving financial stability.
- Preventative income maximisation which engages with single parents encourage them to participate in income maximisation activities before a crisis.
- Employability support, based on the 5 stage employability pipeline of (i) Referral, Engagement & Assessment, (ii) Needs Assessment, (iii) Vocational Activity, (iv) Employer engagement and job matching, and (v) In work support and aftercare.
- Representation, advocacy and partnership, bringing policy makers and service planners together with single parent perspectives to ensure that policy and planning for single parents is informed by the best possible evidence and that services are co-designed and co-produced with people with lived experience.



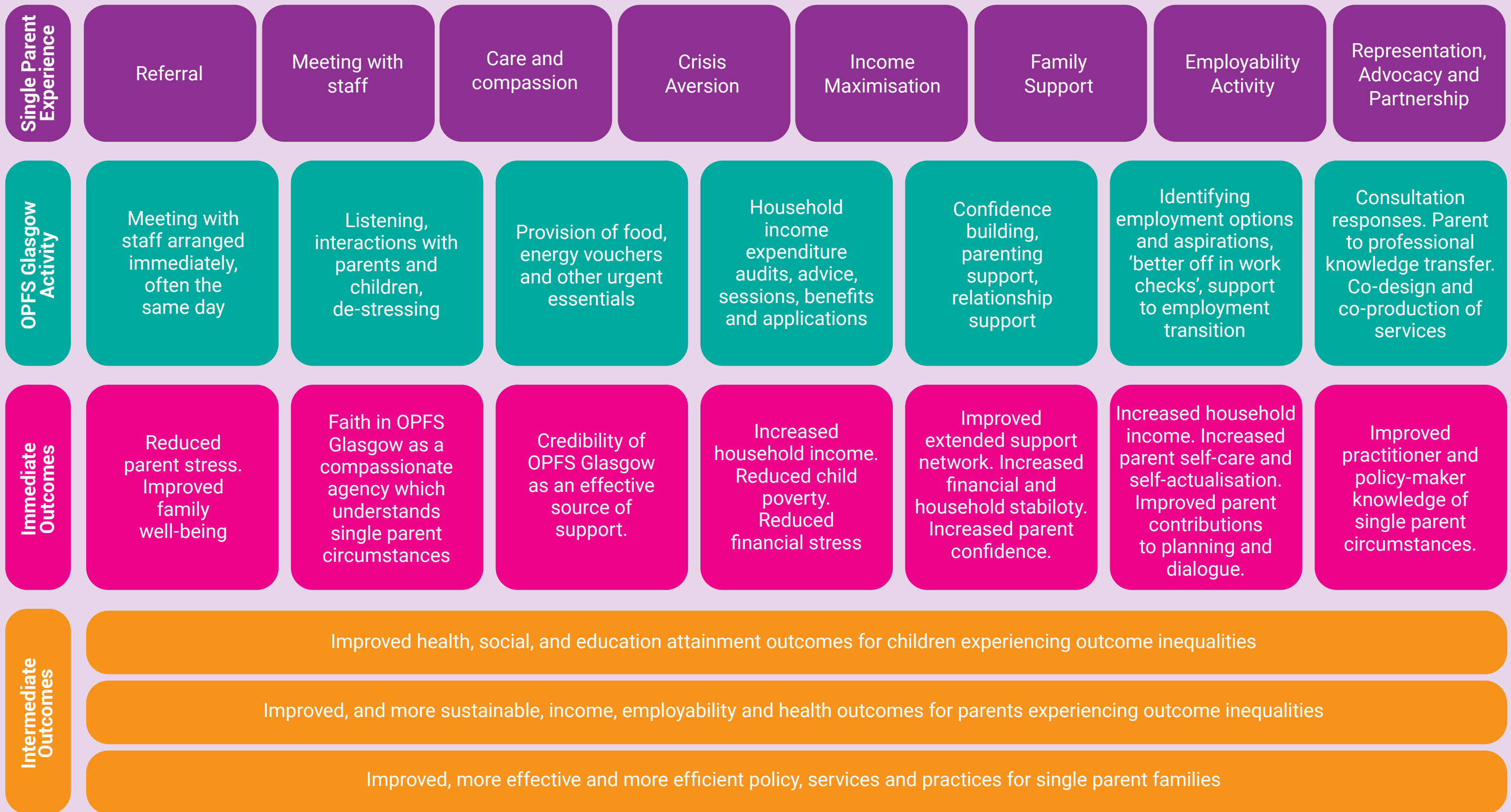
OPFS Glasgow is headed by a full-time Project Manager with service delivery led by specialist lead officers, supported by delivery staff, all of whom have both specialist and generic expertise.

**Figure 1 - OPFS Glasgow staffing structure**





# Figure 2 - OPFS Glasgow process chart







The process diagram shows the journey of a typical parent in their engagement with OPFS Glasgow, the activities they participate in and the outcomes produced by these activities.

It should be noted that not all single parents working with OPFS Glasgow experience this journey in a linear fashion. Single parents engage voluntarily with OPFS Glasgow and access services as and when they are ready to do so.

Although the process chart offers a brief and visual representation of how OPFS Glasgow produces greater and more sustained outcomes, it does not provide an adequately nuanced understanding of how and why these activities and approaches are effective. For single parents, the experience of working with OPFS Glasgow is complex mesh of features and factors. These come together to create an experience that single parents describe as fundamentally different to their experiences of receiving services and support from other agencies.

The following sections describe the single parent experience of working with OPFS Glasgow using the client journey set out in the process diagram. It should be re-iterated that the overall experience for single parents is greater than the sum of the parts, i.e. the outcomes achieved by each service or activity are enhanced and supported by each of the other services and activities.





# Referral and initial presentation

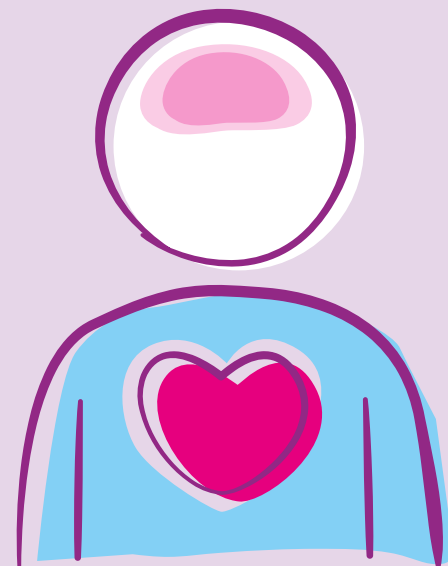
Single parents initially approach OPFS or are referred by one of many referring partners for a variety of reasons, including seeking support with crises, with family wellbeing, with employability, with benefits and finances, with relationships, with extended family and former partners, with housing and with many other topics.

One common factor for almost all single parents at the point of engagement with OPFS Glasgow, is that they don't feel that they are aware of any other agency which can offer them the support they need. Most of them know about and have been in touch with other services, but they don't believe that those services are designed to or able to provide the kind of supports they need.

Another common factor is that single parents often approach OPFS Glasgow when they feel they are at the end of their tether, when they are in crisis, are facing an imminent disaster and that they have nowhere else to turn.

This means that many single parents are in a distressed state when making first contact, and that there is some urgency to the issues they bring with them to OPFS Glasgow.

“When someone does listen and doesn't seem to have their own forms to fill or targets to meet or be trying to fit you into a box, then you don't quite know how to respond to that. You are so used to just having to accept what you can get and go along with how they want you to be.”



It also means that many single parent families may have been living in challenging circumstances for some time before making the approach and that there are often multiple further issues in addition to the urgent or immediate reason for them seeking support from OPFS Glasgow.

The majority of single parents have experience of seeking support from other agencies and have some expectation of a formality of process and of limits to the nature of the support available. Single parents express surprise at the positive way in which they are treated when engaging with OPFS Glasgow.

While many single parents state that they did not know what to expect, almost all felt that the volume of time that staff spend with them, the informality of discussion and the empathy and understanding they experience is very different from other providers and helps them to feel confident that the support they receive will be sympathetic and effective.

These single parents report that they have been used to engaging with services where the provider is in control. They, as service user, expect that providers will be more interested in following organisational procedures, in having the parent conform to a more passive role, and in having them comply with how organisational systems demand they behave.

“You are so used to turning up and then somebody doesn't listen, or if they do actually listen then they tell you what they can do, even if that's nothing really to do with the problem you have. It's like they have a set number of things and that's all they can offer, regardless of what you actually need.”

They report that experiencing a service which appears to be wholly focused on helping them, in whatever way possible, can be initially disorienting. Although initially uncomfortable for some single parents, all report that OPFS Glasgow staff soon put them at ease and helped convince them that OPFS Glasgow intends to simply support them at their own pace and in whatever way suits them as a single parent.





## Meeting with staff

Single parents state that the key to the fundamentally different experience that they find in their engagement with OPFS Glasgow is how the staff behave in their interactions with them. These staff behaviours are summed up by one group of single parents as a meeting of “the personal, the professional and the practical”.

- The Personal: Single parents feel that OPFS Glasgow staff are interested in them and in who they are as a person.
- The Professional: Single parents feel confident that OPFS Glasgow staff are capable of assisting them to solve the problems they experienced
- The Practical: Single parents feel that OPFS Glasgow staff have the skills, contacts and resources to make swift, real, useful differences to their circumstances.

The compassion demonstrated by staff is not the only element of their approach that single parents highlight as being fundamentally different. Single parents note that staff appear to understand and anticipate the kind of problems and issues that single parents experience. This vastly increases their credibility. The fact that many staff have lived experience of single parenthood further enhanced their credibility.

Single parents note that OPFS Glasgow staff actively seek opportunities to provide support, even if this means an increased or more complex workload for them. They point out that staff pro-actively enquire about their circumstances and offer assistance even if they have not explicitly raised an issue or asked for help.

This pro-active approach extends into OPFS Glasgow staff making regular unsolicited contact with them to check on how they are doing or to offer a new resource, activity or support. Single parents contrasted this with experience of other agencies where, if there was unsolicited contact, it appeared to the single parent that the intent of the contact was to “check up on them, not check in on them”.

Single parents believe that OPFS Glasgow staff are always there to support them and contrast this with other experiences where they felt that professionals have been motivated by an intent to monitor, manage or intervene in their lives based on the interests of the agency.



Single parents note that OPFS Glasgow staff take a problem solving approach in their work. They contrast this with experiences of working with agencies where staff appear to have a small suite of interventions to offer but do not appear to be interested in engaging with more complex problems or with issues outside of their remit.

Single parents reported that they often felt that other professionals were more concerned with limiting their intervention than in looking for ways to extend support.

Single parents also note that OPFS Glasgow staff work through the processes of dealing with problems with them and contrasted this with other experiences of agencies which simply provided information or advice. The OPFS Glasgow approach both ensures that action is followed through and gives the single parent confidence that they can better deal with future problems with lower levels of support.

All OPFS Glasgow face-to-face staff are trained in Type 1 money advice and all OPFS Glasgow welfare rights advisors are trained in family support. This means that all staff working face to face with single parents have a broad understanding of the needs of single parents, can provide some level of holistic support and can appropriately and smoothly prepare single parents for work with other specialist staff.

Single parents welcome the fact that they can obtain a full suite of supports within the context of a relationship with a single agency and contrasted this with experiences of having to engage with and explain their situation to multiple agencies in multiple locations with inevitable consequences for their time, funds and the outcomes of their engagement.

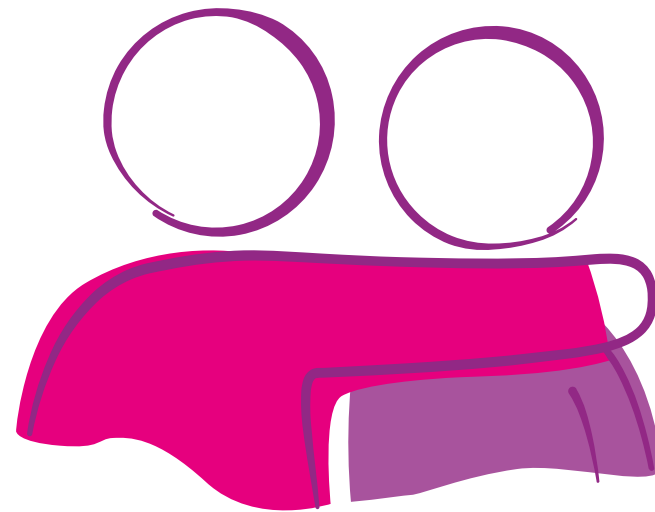




# Compassion and care

Single parents tend to come to OPFS Glasgow when they are at the end of their tether. They are both in circumstantial crisis and in mental and emotional distress. This means that they need a supportive and relaxed environment in which to discuss the reason for their decision to come to OPFS Glasgow.

At OPFS Glasgow, single parents are met by staff with a caring and compassionate personal manner, many of whom have lived experience of single parenthood. They are met in informal and relaxed locations. They are met at a set time, but without a set end time for the appointment. For those parents who attend with children, there are facilities to entertain and care for their children while they meet with OPFS Glasgow staff.



This provides them with an immediately comfortable and supportive environment for their first contact with OPFS Glasgow. Single parents contrasted this to other experiences in which their initial contact with other agencies was made in more formal settings, often with physical barriers between them and the professional with whom they met.

Often, they met with other agencies in buildings which were clearly designed primarily as an administrative base for the agency in which, although members of the public could visit to obtain a service, single parents felt unwelcome, alien or as if they were an inconvenience to the delivery of business.

They described experiences of either not having a set time for their appointment or feeling rushed to conclude their business within a brief window of time. For single parents, many of whom have to attend appointments with children, this meant that they felt additionally burdensome and a greater inconvenience to the agency from which they sought assistance.

They described meeting with staff who appeared rushed, overworked and who did not make them feel the kind of care that they experienced when they first attended a meeting with OPFS Glasgow.



Single parents are clear that they are making no explicit criticism of individual staff in other agencies, or of their capacity for empathy and care for their clients, only that empathy and care is not as immediately apparent as it is when meeting with OPFS Glasgow staff.

“  
When I came to OPFS Glasgow, it was as if they were interested in me. They didn't rush me. They didn't even immediately ask what I wanted. They just listened and they seemed to mean it. I'm not used to that. I'm used to either feeling like a nuisance or to people just demanding I do something better than I can do it.  
”

The setting in which single parents make initial contact and the care which they perceive from the staff with whom they engage is an essential underpinning to how they feel about their first meeting: It conditions all of their subsequent interactions with OPFS Glasgow. For many single parents, presenting in both circumstantial crisis and emotional distress, the key to being able to deal with the crisis is to first reduce the distress. Single parents report that they find engaging with other agencies to be a source of stress, which serves to increase their distress. With OPFS Glasgow, there is no stress created by the setting, and the care and empathy shown by staff serves to decrease their levels of distress.

This provision of care for the person presenting, concurrent with dealing with the problem they present with, is a key feature in establishing OPFS Glasgow as a dependable and credible source of support for single parents. The support for emotional needs, which may be just as urgent as the more tangible problem, helps to generate a bond and the start of a relationship of trust between single parents and OPFS Glasgow staff.

This forms a foundation for the resolution of immediate problems and for the creation of an ongoing relationship which enables single parents to move from recurrent crisis and problem-solving to stability and to self-actualisation.

“  
It was like sitting down in comfy chair to have a chat with someone you trusted. I don't think I even got to what I was there to talk about for ages. Normally, I'm up to here and I just try to blurt out my problem and it all comes out wrong and I can see that they think I am a mess. I probably was a mess, but the important thing is that OPFS Glasgow didn't make me feel like I was one.  
”

# Crisis aversion

At the point of initial presentation to OPFS Glasgow, almost all single parents have one or more pressing priority, something that needs to be dealt with swiftly to avoid or minimise serious negative consequences.

As noted above, when parents initially present to OPFS Glasgow they are commonly both in crisis and in distress. The comforting setting and approach of staff helps to minimise the immediate distress and allows parents to explain the crisis they are facing with greater clarity and, for many, a greater sense of perspective.

For almost all single parents, the immediate and urgent problem with which they come to OPFS Glasgow is financial. In many cases, the problem can be solved in an immediate sense with a swift provision of resource.

This may be either through a food bank referral, a fuel voucher, an emergency grant or other way of ensuring that the parent can continue to provide adequate care for themselves and their families.

“By the time I had finished talking to them, the problem that seemed too huge to even think about when I went in didn't seem that impossible.”

For single parents with an urgent financial challenge, there can be a greater urgency and greater level of stress than may be experienced by single people or by people who have no dependents. A single person facing immediate hardship may not experience the kind of guilt and panic that a single parent, with sole responsibility for the care of vulnerable children may feel.

“You would be in a total panic. If it was just yourself, you'd find a way to get by, or you wouldn't, and either way it would be on you. When you've kids to look after, if the electricity goes off or there's nothing but beans in the cupboard, then you feel like you've let the kids down too.”

In almost every situation, OPFS Glasgow has access to the kind of resources, referrals and partnerships that allow an urgent financial challenge to be resolved on the same day. This immediate assistance may include food parcels, fuel vouchers, advocacy on single parents' behalf, including negotiation with creditors or with other agencies or any other action that OPFS Glasgow staff can take to both stabilise the single parent's immediate circumstances and reduce their stress levels.

# De-stressing

This dual outcome of de-stressing the parent and resolving the crisis situation creates a rapport between staff and single parent and a credibility for OPFS Glasgow that sets a foundation for a productive relationship. This is a relationship in which the single parent has a greater confidence in the quality of support they will receive than they may have had in other encounters with professional agencies.

Although most single parents first come to OPFS Glasgow because they have an urgent financial challenge, many are on low incomes and have ongoing financial struggles. Almost all parents presenting to OPFS Glasgow are on benefits, or in low income employment supplemented by benefits.

OPFS Glasgow deal with all single parents presenting to them as an opportunity to open up a longer term relationship and to offer a range of supports. Unlike other agencies where a client presentation may be treated as a one-off, and any second presentation as a separate case, OPFS Glasgow seek to maintain contact with all single parents who come through the door.

It is, of course, entirely up to the parents whether they choose to take up this offer, but the majority do and, for most, the next stage in their relationship with OPFS Glasgow is to work with staff on a financial health check.





# Income maximisation

A financial health check is offered to single parents as an additional support once the urgent presenting crisis is addressed. For almost all parents the offer of a financial health check is seen as both credible and valuable because of the positive experience of their initial engagement with OPFS Glasgow.

“By the time I had finished talking to them, the problem that seemed too huge to even think about when I went in didn't seem that impossible.”

The financial health check establishes if they are eligible for other benefits. A review of the impact of the financial health check on benefit levels showed that of 21 cases which were randomly selected from the OPFS Glasgow database all except one achieved an increase in overall benefit levels following the financial health check.

This relatively simple intervention can have an immediate and sustained impact on household income and, consequently, on levels of child poverty.

Increased household income, while a valuable outcome, is experienced by many single parents as a reduction or removal of income related stress. This has the knock-on effect of improving the mental health and wellbeing of the parent and, for many, improving the quality of their relationships and interactions with their children and others.



# Family wellbeing

Although an increase in household income may be the most tangible and easily enumerated outcome from OPFS Glasgow's work with single parents, when single parents were asked, as part of this review, to describe the difference that OPFS Glasgow had made to them, they almost universally described the sensation of relief and of release from the fear and dread of being unable to meet their family's basic needs.

They then described how that had made them happier and made them more able to focus on maintaining positive relationships with their children and others.

“You know I can't really think back to how it was before, but I know it was not good. Now I know that I'm not always stressing and things are better at home because of that. The kids are happier too. You can see it. It's just a world of difference.”

The Scottish Government's 'Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022 to 2026' makes it clear that family wellbeing is fundamental to creating the conditions for families to be able to navigate their way out of poverty.

Annex 2 of 'Best Start, Bright Futures' further describes the importance of ensuring that wellbeing outcomes are produced created as a result of reductions in poverty, demonstrating the circular relationship between wellbeing and poverty.

“Reflecting on broader outcomes, experience has made us mindful of the need to ensure that income-based policies continue to support wellbeing. For example, it is no good encouraging a single mother to work long hours if this impacts negatively on the wellbeing of her and her child.”

OPFS Glasgow offer single parents an opportunity to continue contact with the organisation through informal drop-in services and through regular informal contact between OPFS Glasgow staff and parents. Crucially, this is not focused on the resolution of problems or the achievement of targets, but on the maximisation of wellbeing.

<sup>6</sup> The one single parent who did not had undertaken a similar check with another agency shortly before approaching OPFS Glasgow and hence had already maximised their potential income from benefit entitlement.



Although not all single parents are in a position to take up the opportunity of regularly attending drop-ins, OPFS Glasgow staff nevertheless maintain contact with them through regular text messages, calls and offers of other supports and opportunities when they became available.

In some cases, these contacts are simply to check in, make sure that single parents feel supported and have a listening ear if they need it. In other cases, the calls are to offer other opportunities or supports.

OPFS Glasgow regularly receives donations of food, toys, household goods and other items for redistribution to single parents. The organisation is also able to offer single parent families the opportunity of taking short breaks through arrangements with a variety of holiday and accommodation providers. All of these give OPFS Glasgow staff reasons to contact single parents and something to offer over and above the value of simply checking in with them. Single parents report that these opportunities are welcome and help them feel more able to provide for their children and to develop and improve their relationships with their children and wider families.

One of the concerns that single parents regularly express in their early engagement with OPFS Glasgow, after their urgent and immediate challenges have been addressed, are feelings of inadequacy, failure and guilt associated with their perceptions of their ability to provide for their children. This is immediately related to the difficulties of being on a low income in terms of their ability to give their children the kind of lifestyle that that they see in other families.

“  
When you know you have no money and there's no food in the fridge. Or even when you know you can't afford to send your wean on the school trip, you feel like you've failed them.  
”

It is also a consequence of their perception that their own stress is apparent to their children. Single parents fear that their feelings of stress make their children feel stressed and fearful and negatively affects their ability to maintain positive, supportive relationships with their children.

“  
Having no money makes you panic. You're living close to your children. They feel your panic. They're not stupid. Then they panic because they think if you're panicking something must be really wrong. Then there's just this vicious circle.  
”

OPFS Glasgow's work with single parents helps them to establish greater financial stability. Greater financial stability creates a reduction in stress and the opportunity for single parents to feel better able to cope and better able to provide the kind of parenting that they want to provide for their children.





# Self-actualisation

A phenomenon that single parents experience, but rarely explicitly expressed at the point of engagement with OPFS Glasgow, is the loss of their sense of self. Many single parents have limited opportunities to spend time with peers, and even more limited opportunities to spend time with peers in settings where children are not the primary focus of thought and attention. For single parents on low incomes, who may have to expend a greater amount of mental energy on providing for their children, and who may have few resources to spend on themselves, this experience is compounded.

The result of this is that single parents can go through a loss of their sense of self and can have a limited conception of who they are other than as a parent. The further consequence of this is that they have very limited ability to conceive of or consider their own needs, ambitions and future plans.

OPFS Glasgow interventions give single parents the breathing space they need to regain a sense of themselves as more than solely parents, and to begin to think of the importance of caring for themselves without the guilt they may have previously felt for not focusing 100% of their mental and emotional energy on their children.



The drop-in services give single parents time to spend in the company of their peers and, although the common factor which bonds them is their experience of single parenthood, the activities in the drop-in and the conversations between single parents and OPFS Glasgow staff create prompts for participants to reflect on their own situations and to support other single parents to do so.

Drop-ins allow single parents to find new friends and to develop new positive relationships with peers. Frequently these friendships take on a life outside of the drop-in and single parents support each other to re-engage with social activities that, prior to single parenthood, they may have taken for granted.

This process happens slowly and organically. Single parents almost unanimously reported that they were not aware of it as an issue and only gradually became aware of it retrospectively as they achieved greater financial, circumstantial and emotional stability.

“There very definitely is a thing where after you’ve been coming here for a while you realise that you’ve spent years being a mum and nothing else. Your whole world and everything you think about is your child and doing the best for them. You don’t know it at the time, but it’s not healthy.”

<sup>7</sup> Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022 to 2026, Scottish Government, March 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022-2026 - annex 2: child poverty evaluation strategy – updated, Scottish Government, March 2022

“

I know that now I'm happier and more comfortable being me and I've got things that I do on my own and I've got goals and things I want to do. Before I would never have thought about me. Part of it is you get the time with yourself. Part of it is seeing other people. Part of it is the staff.”

”

This loss of self affects single parents' ability to identify or progress employment goals and acts as an internal barrier to improving employability, increasing their hours of work or changing the nature of their work ambitions. The recreation of a sense of self, combined with increased stability, creates an opportunity for single parents to think of their aspirations for themselves and their children.

This opportunity to achieve change within the self, for many single parents, is the first step towards setting and pursuing employment and employability goals.

“

It's only once you're settled within yourself that you can think of the future. Until then you are just managing each day as it comes. People don't realise that. They think that you can just start looking for a job or a better job or whatever, but you can't even think of that or that you deserve that, until you are ready and able for it.”

”

## Employability

OPFS Glasgow offers employability support to single parents at the point when they are ready and are motivated to positively engage with the support available. Support varies but starts from looking at the assets the single parent holds – the skills they have and the value they could bring to an employer. For some single parents this means building on their skills through volunteering or training and enhancing their ability to demonstrate their capacity to commit to set hours and to meet challenges. For other single parents this means finding new work, increasing the number of hours worked or progressing within their present workplace.

Single parents place an importance on employability which goes beyond the potential for increase in income. Although the increase in income is welcome, single parents describe progress in employability as an extension of their self-actualisation, as a means through which they recover a sense of themselves as an active, productive, useful person. The challenges of achieving and maintaining progress in employment and employability situations are described by single parents as positive experiences which demonstrate to them their ability to manage challenge and to turn challenge into opportunity.

“

When you're a single parent, you think you can't ever get a better job. You'll always be stuck because of childcare. You've also got the fear about going out and working with people, because all you know is looking after the kids. I love it now though. Getting the bus to work, talking to people at work, learning new things... It's like a whole new opportunity for life.”

”



# Representation, advocacy and partnership

In recent years, there has been an increased level of interest and investment from the Scottish public sector in working with people with lived experience of issues, particularly of poverty, to inform and to co-produce services and policy .

Single parenthood can be stressful and time-consuming and the priorities of single parents can, quite reasonably, not include engagement with the relatively abstract processes of service design and policy making.

“We’ve been to the parliament in Edinburgh and we’ve been working on how things should change for other single parents. You need to be in a good place and ready before you can do that. When you are scrabbling about trying to make ends meet, you can’t think of that sort of thing.”

OPFS Glasgow’s long term working relationships with single parents, and the outcomes of stability and self-actualisation that are achieved through these long-term relationships help prepare single parents to engage with these processes.

Stability and self-actualisation offers single parents the mental space to consider their circumstances and the challenges they have faced. This can give them valuable insights to contribute to processes of service, programme and policy design.

The long term working relationship that OPFS staff develop with parents, means that they can engage parents in complex and abstract processes about how policy for single parents can be improved and how services for single parents may be designed.



<sup>9</sup> See ‘Co-production involving ‘experts with lived experience of poverty’ in policy and service development in Scotland: a rapid review of academic literature.’ John H. McKendrick, Jill Marchbank and Stephen Sinclair for Glasgow Caledonian University and Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit, May 2021



# Co-design and Co-production

OPFS staff work closely with partners in Glasgow City Council on the design of services for single parents. The involvement of single parents produces a tripartite partnership which enables codesign and can co-produce new and improved services. This means that the priorities of Glasgow City Council, the expertise and resources of OPFS Glasgow, and the insights of single parents are all incorporated in thinking and design.

This tripartite process enriches the work of all parties, builds commitment to the work and generates new ideas which can be piloted, tested and improved through an iterative process.

This contrasts with more traditional models of service development in which a funder sets out criteria, and perhaps outcomes, but has little or no involvement in the design of services to deliver on those outcomes.

It further contrasts with models of service design in which professionals create systems, processes and resources for service users with only evaluative feedback from service users on earlier iterations of the service or consultation with existing service users to inform them.

This alternative process limits the potential for conflict between the funder and sponsor of services and the funded provider of services. It means that when the priorities of one partner change, the potential for conflict with other partners is reduced because of the dialogical, participative and positive nature of the relationships between the three parties.

It means that fear of losing future funding does not incentivise the funded organisation to provide the most positive possible evidence of performance to the funder. It means that the motivations of all three parties are to deliver the best possible service, achieve the best possible outcomes and learn lessons from the work that allows them to develop and improve future iterations of service.

As a result, services can be more clearly and more effectively focused on achieving positive outcomes for single parent families and that the design of those services is more suited to the needs of those families.

## Examples of partnership, co-design and co-production

OPFS single parents were involved in co designing and producing the Commitment and Indicators for the Working together for a Fairer Glasgow Employability Standards in partnership with Glasgow City Council.

At all stages in the development of the Scottish Government Child and Adult Disability Payments, officers from Scottish Government worked with single parents from OPFS Glasgow to assist in the design of application forms and the production of guidance and support materials.

As part of the setting up, the Scottish Government undertook a review of the implementation of the new payments. Six single parents from OPFS Glasgow were invited to offer views

In November 2022, seven parents from OPFS Glasgow undertook advance testing of the Scottish Child Payment on behalf of Social Security Scotland in advance of the new payment going live in mid-November.



# OPFS Glasgow and child poverty

Single parents are disproportionately represented in the profile of families affected by child poverty and are therefore a priority group for interventions intended to reduce child poverty.

OPFS Glasgow's organisational mission is set out in the strapline "Changing lives, Challenging poverty". Single parents and OPFS Glasgow are a key third sector partner in addressing child poverty in single parent families.

In February 2017 the Scottish Government introduced the Child Poverty Bill, which was passed unanimously by Scottish Parliament in November 2017. This sets out targets to reduce the number of children experiencing the effects of poverty by 2030 and places a duty on local authorities and health boards to report annually on activity they are taking, and will take, to reduce child poverty. It also identifies six priority families at high risk of poverty: single parents, families with a disabled adult or child, young mothers, minority ethnic families, families with a child under one, and larger families, i.e. those with three or more children.

## The child poverty targets state that by 2030, of children living in Scottish households:

Less than 10% should be living in relative poverty (how many families are on low incomes compared with middle income households)

Less than 5% should be living in absolute poverty (how many low income families are not seeing their living standards improving over time)

Less than 5% should be living with combined low income and material deprivation (how many lower income families cannot afford basic necessities)

Less than 5% should be living in persistent poverty (how many families live on low incomes three years out of four)

The Glasgow Challenge Child Poverty Partnership leads work in Glasgow to plan and deliver action to address child poverty. Working with the Centre for Civic Innovation, Glasgow City Council have conducted substantial and detailed analysis of levels of child poverty in Glasgow and are working on establishing measures of change in the levels of child poverty across the city.

The Centre for Civic Innovation Report 'Child Poverty in Glasgow Report 2020' notes that

**"The poverty thresholds are calculated based on 60% of the equivalised UK household median income, which is information provided by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). The Government only provides information on two household compositions and being that there are 64 different household compositions within the Housing Benefit data, the Financial Inclusion team calculated a complete set of poverty thresholds to match each individual housing composition ensuring that our measurements are as accurate as possible."**

This means that any calculation of individual household income against the 60% of national median poverty threshold is at risk of being misleading as it does not take household composition into account. The 60% of national median income figure is useful at population level, but not for individual households or specific target groups like single parents.

Glasgow City Council has the capacity and data to perform a significantly more accurate, nuanced and detailed analysis of change in single parent family household incomes. This evaluation therefore makes no effort to duplicate the work of Glasgow City Council. Instead, we describe a snapshot of how working with OPFS Glasgow has changed the income of a sample of single parent households.

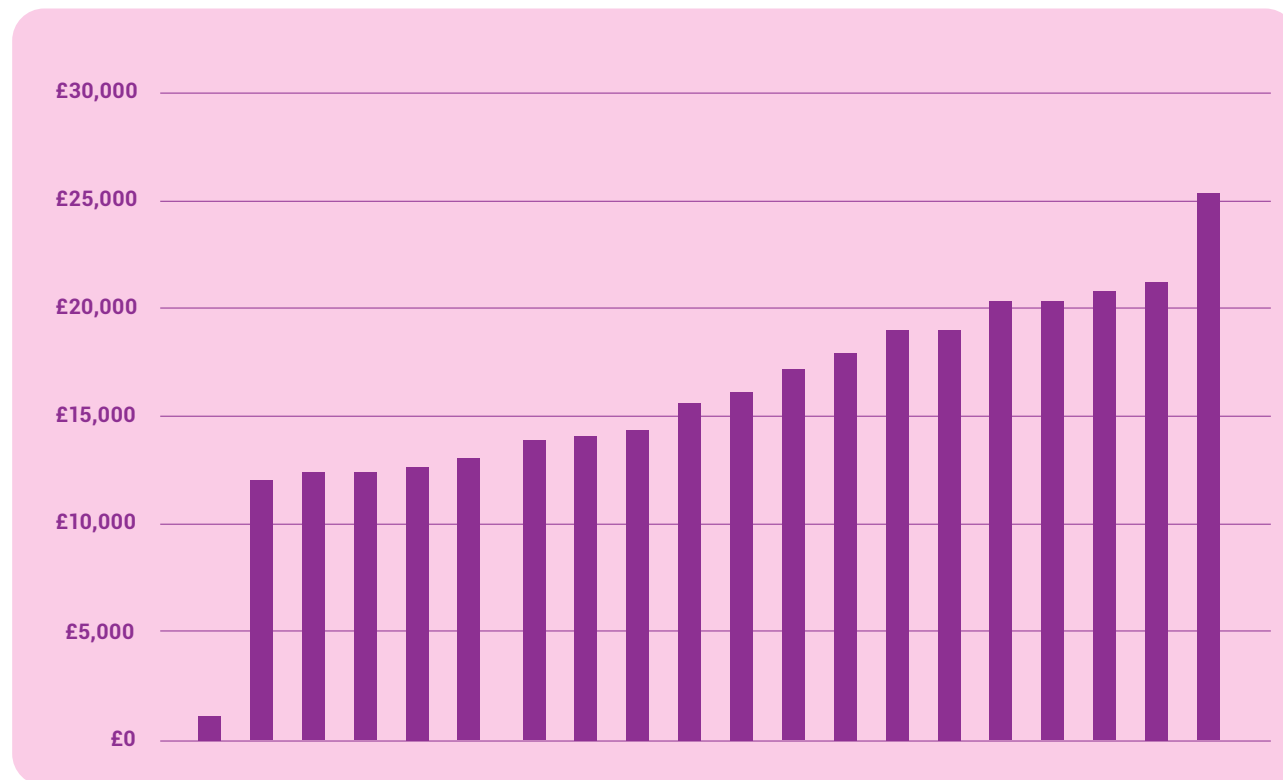
<sup>10</sup> See Child Poverty in Glasgow Report 2020, Centre for Civic Innovation for Glasgow City Council Financial Inclusion Team.



## The sample

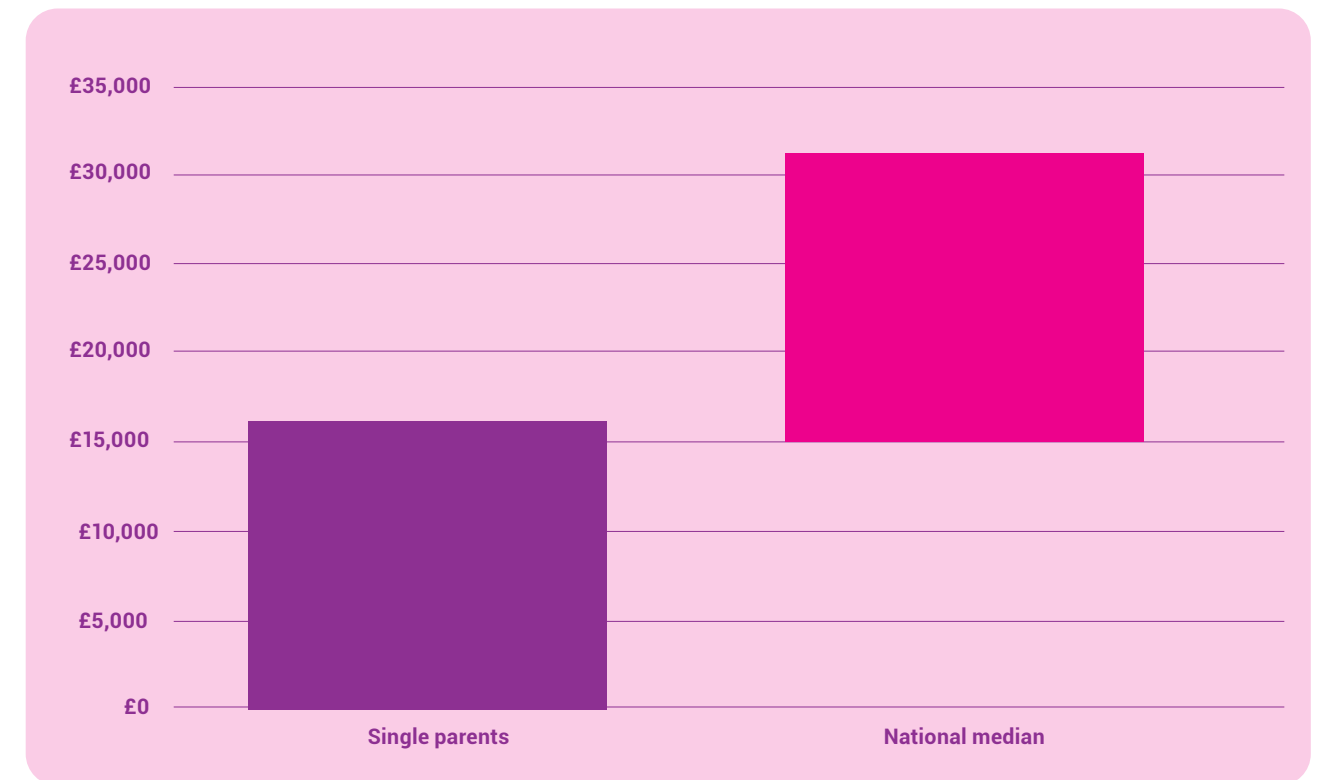
A sample of single parents was selected at random from the OPFS database of clients engaged in 2021/22. The sample is made up of 21 households, all but one of which was headed by a female single parent. One had 5 children, four had 3 children, seven had 2 children and the remainder had 1 child. Six of the single parents in the sample identified as disabled.

**Figure 3 – Sample household income at point of engagement with OPFS Glasgow**



The highest income in the sample is £25,522 and the median is £15,960. The lowest income of any household in our sample was £0. This was a result of the individual presenting at a point almost immediately after a relationship breakdown in which their partner controlled all the income including benefits payable for children. This individual also had no confirmed right to reside in the UK and hence had no access to benefits or work in their own right. OPFS Glasgow staff report that situations like this are not uncommon and they may see around 20 similar cases in any given year.

**Figure 4 – Comparison of sample household median income at point of engagement**

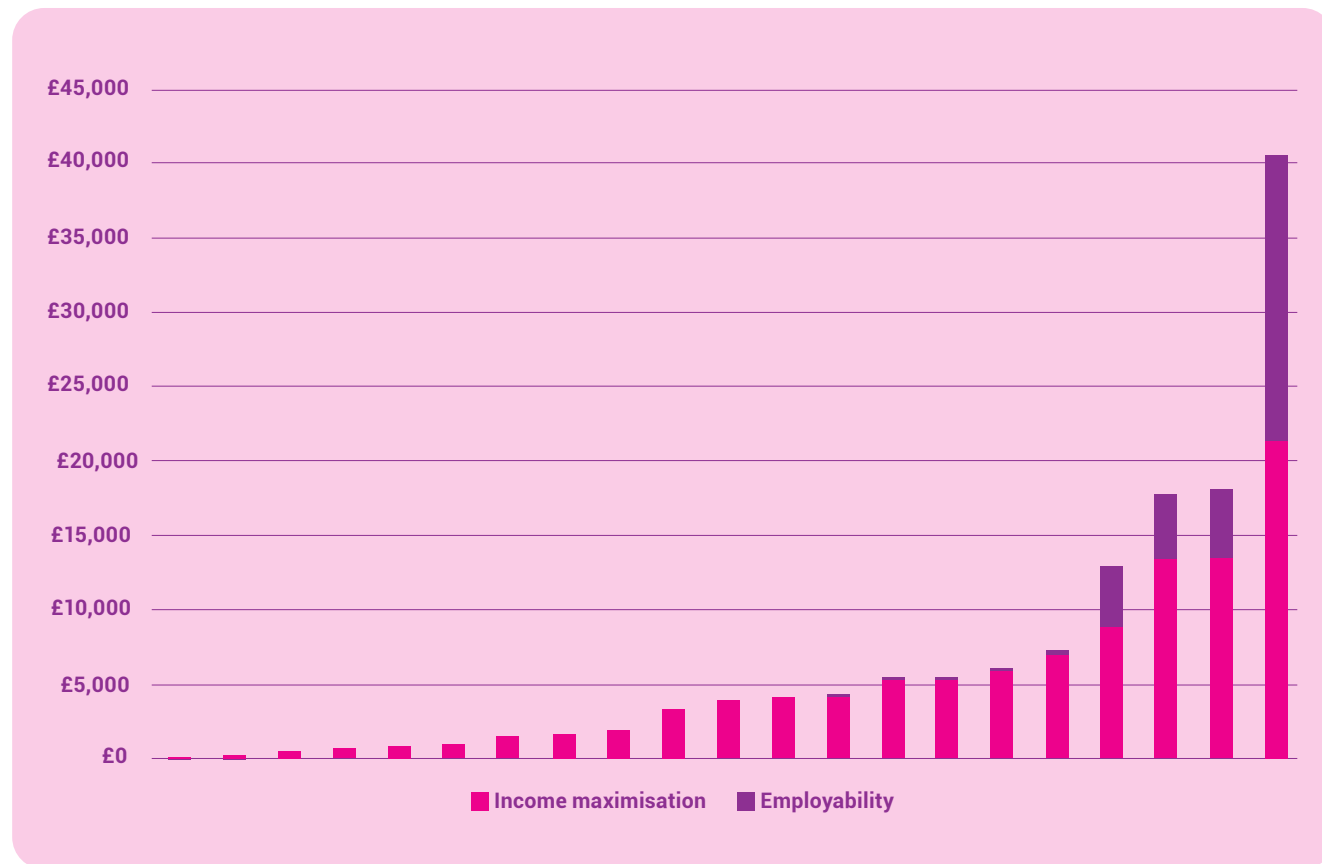


The Office for National Statistics calculates that the national household median disposable income for the financial year ending 2021 was £31,400. Clearly all of the single parent households in our sample fell well below this income level. The median income of single parent households in our sample, at the point of engagement with OPFS Glasgow, is £15,960, some £15,440 lower than the national median for all households in the UK.

<sup>11</sup> Disposable income' in this context describes the amount of money households have available for spending and saving after direct taxes have been accounted for. Although the term is commonly used to describe the money that households have after paying for all expenses regarded as essential and therefore available to spend freely, this may be more correctly referred to as 'discretionary income'.



Figure 5 – Income increase from point of engagement

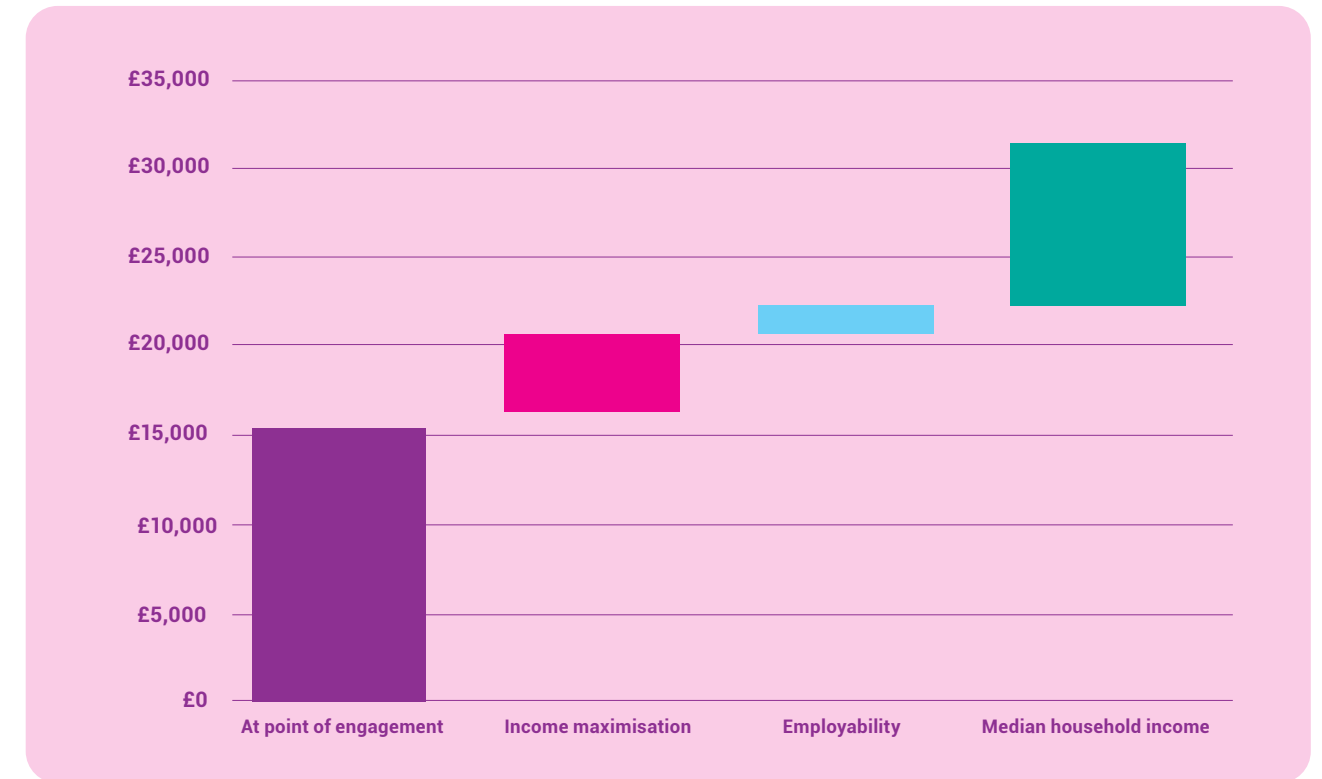


The graph above shows that the actual cash increase achieved by households following income maximisation interventions ranged from £0 (in the case of the client who had maximised their income prior engagement) to £21,327, a mean average increase of £4,990.

Five clients in the sample had gone on to employment as a result of employability interventions and had further increased their real income, i.e., allowing for benefit reductions, by between £230 and £19,187 per annum. Only one client has achieved an income greater than the national median household income.

It may be noted that it is not uncommon for OPFS Glasgow clients to accept minimal increases in income when transitioning into employment. This is viewed by the single parent as an investment in obtaining more, and better paid, work in the medium to longer term.

Figure 6 – Comparison of impact of interventions on sample median income



The graph above shows that the median income of our sample moved consistently upwards following OPFS Glasgow interventions.

The level of income increase achieved for each parent naturally varies depending on their circumstances at the time the present to OPFS Glasgow and the impact of the interventions that OPFS Glasgow is able to make. In some cases, these interventions will be effective in raising single parent families out of poverty or, at the very least, reducing the level of poverty and hardship they experience.

These are welcome results for single parent households. If replicated across all of the single parents with whom OPFS Glasgow work every year, this will make a substantial contribution to Scottish Government and Glasgow City Council targets for reduction of child poverty.



## Conclusion

OPFS Glasgow is committed to no single parent family living in poverty and supports the Scottish Government and Glasgow targets for reduction in child poverty

Scottish Government Child Poverty strategy identifies the following three drivers of child poverty.

- Income from employment.
- Cost of living.
- Income from Social Security and Benefits in Kind

OPFS Glasgow services works to maximise the income that single parent families can achieve from employment and benefits and helps reduce families living costs through advice on family finances and debt.

Beyond this, the OPFS Glasgow approach to work with single parents is effective in making a positive difference to the lives, aspirations and outcomes achieved by single parents and their families. The OPFS Glasgow model increases the income of single parent families but, perhaps more importantly, increases the stability and sustainability of income for single parent families.

This reduces the risk of single parents falling back into poverty – the churn effect. It further creates the conditions for single parents to progress their aspirations beyond simply the relief of poverty.

The model is complex and works as a result of a ‘perfect storm’ of features and factors. As a proven model, which has been in place for many years, the model is sustainable, and may be built on through partnership.

Replication by other agencies is likely to be challenging due to the fact that OPFS is the only agency working solely with single parents and the maturity and nuance of the model of intervention and the highly specialised skills of the staff involved in delivery and management.



Although the OPFS Glasgow interventions may not be sufficient in all cases to move households over the poverty threshold, this is not a result of any flaw in the services, but of the limitations of both the benefits system and wage rates as a means of removing people from poverty.

As the cost of living rises, there is a risk that the suite of interventions open to OPFS Glasgow and available to single parent families are insufficient to meet child poverty targets.

This implies that there will be a requirement for substantial innovation and development if child poverty targets are to be met.

Uniquely, the OPFS Glasgow model produces opportunities for involvement of highly capable, motivated and insightful single parents in working productively with OPFS Glasgow and partners in the Glasgow Challenge Child Poverty Partnership to review, co-design, co-produce services to tackle child poverty in single parent families.



Working with single parents to co-design and co-produce services will require tripartite contributions from OPFS Glasgow as professional experts in supporting single parents, from single parents as experts by experience in receiving and navigating services, and Glasgow Challenge Child Poverty Partners as experts in the implementation of child poverty policy and strategy and managers of significant resources.

There is already substantial experience of this form of tripartite working in Glasgow, and the potential for this experience to further develop. Present procedures for allocation of resources for action on Child Poverty, to an extent, demand a separation between funded organisation and the funders and an element of competition for funding. These procedures mitigate against a fuller development of the kind of co-design and co-production that may be possible.



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