

Addressing child poverty through parental employment

Submission to inquiry by the
Scottish Parliament's Social
Justice and Social Security
Committee

5th April 2023



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

Answer to questions 1, 2 and 4:

What changes to childcare provision in Scotland could have the greatest impact on child poverty? What type of childcare could work best to serve the needs of parents in employment or seeking employment?

A forthcoming position paper from Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS), 'A Childcare System for All: Putting gender equality at the centre of Scotland's childcare policy' details the links between women's economic and social equality and childcare which works for children and families.

To tackle child poverty and to support parents to enter and remain in quality, fairly paid work, OPFS and Close the Gap recommend building on Scotland's existing commitments to affordable, flexible and accessible childcare through the following set of principles:

- A system of childcare that puts choice for all families at the heart of provision.
- A universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged 6 months and above that is free at the point of use for all families.
- A high-quality service which delivers positive outcomes for children and realises children's rights.
- A diverse and skilled childcare workforce that is valued, fairly paid, and gender balanced.
- Flexible delivery that enables families to access childcare when they need and want it.
- Investment in childcare should be considered as necessary infrastructure for a sustainable wellbeing economy and a good society.
- Work towards a childcare system that is not-for-profit.

In March 2023, the UK Government also announced an expansion of funded childcare in England. The increased funding will result in Scottish Government receiving £320m through Barnett consequentials. It is critical that Scottish Government use this to improve childcare in Scotland, in line with the principles outlined above.

Background

The lack of affordable and flexible childcare has a direct impact on child poverty. At the same time, it reinforces women's social, economic and labour market inequality because women continue to be more likely to carry out the bulk of unpaid childcare. Childcare provision often determines whether women have a job, the type of job they have, the

hours they work, and the amount of pay they get.

NatCen data from 2019 found that women in opposite sex couples were undertaking approximately 68% of the housework and 68% of the childcare ('Changing patterns in parental time use in the UK', 2019). Gender Pay Gap statistics analysed by Close the Gap in 2021 found that the unequal distribution of childcare remains a key cause of the gender pay gap. These trends were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic with evidence showing that women with caring roles reduced their paid working hours substantially, and by more than their male counterparts.

For the 90% of single parents who are women, these inequalities are only intensified, as their sole childcare responsibilities act as a barrier to entering the workforce or taking on more hours, while having only one household income means the financial pressure on single parents is even greater. This is directly linked to the fact that 38% of children in single parent households live in poverty, compared to 24% of all children (Scottish Government, 2020).

The Office of National Statistics (2020) finds that employment is 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.

However, the employment rate 'gap' between single parents and other household types has risen from 6.2 to 9.3 percentage points over last three years. The employment rate for single parents has fallen from 69.9% in 2019 down to 66.4% in 2022. This is back to the 2016 level. The largest component is a 10ppt drop where youngest child is aged 11-15 (ONS Statistics on employment by family type 2022). This is going backwards on employment participation after decades of improvement.

Availability of (suitable) childcare

Research by OPFS and the JRF ('Freeing low-income single parents from in-work poverty's grip', 2021) found that a consistent experience of single parents is a lack affordable and wraparound childcare. In particular, the childcare system fails to meet the needs of children under the age of three and disabled children. This research highlighted that for single parents to have equal access to the labour market and break the cycle of poverty, there needs to be transformational change in Scotland's childcare provision.

Coram's Childcare Survey 2023 found a major gap in provision of childcare for under 2s and disabled children in Scotland, as well as school age childcare. This reflects the findings of OPFS's 2022 report 'Living Without a Lifeline: Single Parenting and the Cost-of-Living Crisis', in which single parents told us that the biggest issues facing them with childcare were: affordability; childcare which was not reflective of actual need (for example, flexibility and times of day); and lack of childcare availability, either in terms of suitable services within the local area or available places for children.

Parents highlighted that a lack of availability was a particular issue for disabled children

and for out-of-school and holiday childcare. The research also found that 28.3% of parents with a disabled child were not in paid work, compared to just 8.4% of parents who were not disabled and did not have a disabled child. The research also found that 28.3% of single parent participants with a disabled child were not in paid work, compared to just 8.4% of parents who were not disabled and did not have a disabled child.

Affordability of childcare

Recent policy developments have had limited success in realising Scottish Government's ambitions around childcare and the needs of families across Scotland. 1140 hours of funded childcare still only amounts to the duration of the school day and therefore does not deliver sufficient provision to enable all women to work full-time should they need or want to. Moreover, the delivery of the funded hours at the local level is often insufficiently flexible to meet the needs of women, particularly single mothers, and their families. The funded entitlement has not yet negated the need for expensive top-up childcare, particularly for single parents and those who work atypical hours.

Coram found that childcare for three- and four-year-olds up to 50 hours had seen a bigger increase in cost in Scotland than in other UK countries since 2022, at 5.8%. The average cost for an additional 20 hours per week of nursery childcare for three and four-year-olds in Scotland is £102.37. For 2-year-olds, the average cost of 50 hours of nursery childcare in Scotland is £225.44 per week, while for under 2s it is £227.17.

Survey data published by Scottish Government found that three-fifth of parents reported having some difficulties affording childcare, including 16% reporting significant difficulties ('Parents' views and use of early learning and childcare in Scotland' 2022). Single parents were twice as likely as dual earner households to report having significant difficulties paying for childcare, and more likely to raise concerns about paying fees, deposits and other costs upfront. The research by OPFS in 2022 found that more than one in five (21.2%) single parents said they could no longer afford childcare at all, while a further 22.9% were finding it extremely difficult to afford. Alongside this, parents were struggling to cover essential costs like gas, electricity and cutting back on food for themselves so that their children's needs could be met.

Many of the comments made by single parents in the survey focused on the cost:

"I'm 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."

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

“Childcare costs are very costly, when my child was in childcare it felt like I was working to pay that bill at the end of the month.”

“A key issue for me is 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 cost of childcare is likely to become an increasing financial barrier to parents entering employment and a more significant contributor to debt in low-income households. This is particularly true in the context of the ongoing cost of living crisis. Scottish Government official statistics show that single parent families are the household type most likely to be in unmanageable debt, at 9.8% compared to 4.1% of all households and 6.8% of couples with children (‘Wealth in Scotland 2006-2020’).

Social Security

Meanwhile, women who stay at home before Universal Credit conditionality applies when their child turns three are often forced into poverty by a social security system that has faced repeated cuts and changes which leave single parent families disproportionately worse off. There are limited financial gains for parents in receipt of Universal Credit moving from part-time to full-time work, as they face increasing childcare costs as their working hours increase and receive lower Universal Credit payments as their earnings rise. This effectively traps women, particularly single mothers, in low-paid part-time work.

In the 2023 budget, the UK Government announced advanced payments to help low-income parents with childcare costs, as well as an increase to the amount that can be claimed, however, this will still be capped at 85% of childcare costs. It was also announced that there will be stricter conditionality requiring parents to seek work or increase their hours in order to access the advance payments, despite substantial evidence including a five-year study showing that benefits sanctions were ineffective, caused stress, anxiety and depression and pushed people into poverty (ESRC ‘Welfare Conditionality Project’ 2013-2018).

To reduce child poverty in single parent families, and across the six child poverty priority groups including households with a disabled parent or child, it is essential to make childcare more affordable and accessible, while also ensuring that the social security system provides adequate support for families where parents are working lower hours or in lower income jobs.

Flexibility

Parents have consistently reported that they need childcare that is available at the times that they need it, and which is responsive to their work patterns. Many parents work outwith 'regular' working hours, and many have variable working hours. This is particularly likely to affect those in lower-paid and insecure work with variable shift patterns, meaning that flexibility in childcare is directly linked to supporting those most affected by poverty.

Over the years, OPFS and other third sector providers have delivered a range of childcare services to attempt to plug the gaps in mainstream childcare provision, for example, childcare at home/sitter services. While this has supported parents who lived in the local areas where funding for these services were available, there has not been a comprehensive national programme.

A model of flexible day care was developed and tested by OPFS and is now delivered through Flexible Childcare Services Scotland. Early evaluations of the service showed how vital it is for parents to be able to study, secure work, increase their hours and progress in work ('Families House: Flexible daycare – the social impact of a family-friendly approach to childcare' 2017, Flexible Childcare Service Scotland: Our social impact 2017/18).

The adoption of this approach in delivering 50 hours of childcare in each local authority, tailored to local demographics, would provide a lifeline for families on low incomes. Research from Flexibility Works and Flexible Childcare Services Scotland demonstrates that flexible working patterns and flexible childcare are key to keeping families out of poverty.

This also needs to include the provision of funded childcare which allows for parents who are out-of-work or seeking to progress to better paid employment to access one-off training, education, or employability support.

Quality of childcare

Improving access to childcare will have help reduce child poverty not only because it supports parents into work, but because access to good quality Early Learning and Childcare helps to close the poverty-related attainment gap, reducing inequalities and fostering benefits that last throughout a child's life. This dual role was recently acknowledged in a report by Audit Scotland. It is therefore vital that childcare provision is high quality and that inequalities are not reinforced in children's earliest and most formative years by keeping quality ELC out of reach for low-income families. The same is true of school age childcare, which has the potential to improve children's outcomes and attainment, while also supporting parents to work or increase their hours. arrangement

in place. 16% of those still on Direct Pay said they do not receive the full amount and 20% said their payment is not usually on time.

A fairly paid and valued workforce

To ensure the quality, availability and accessibility of childcare, it is essential that the childcare workforce is fairly paid. At present, the undervaluation of this predominantly female workforce is the cause of the sector's recruitment and retention problem. This problem is constraining the effective delivery of the 1140 hours, and will make it impossible to achieve the Scottish Government's commitments to expand funded hours to one and two-year-olds and build a system of school age childcare.

In order to meet these ambitions, the Scottish Government's forthcoming Strategic Framework for Scotland's Childcare Profession should set out action to improve the status, pay, and terms and conditions of the ELC workforce including more ambitious targets on pay which go beyond the real Living Wage; increasing the qualifications requirements for early years staff; and the introduction of national terms and conditions.

Benefits of a universal approach

An increased funded entitlement will be of greatest benefit to low-income families, but it will also contribute to the advancement of gender equality for medium and higher earning households. The extent of women's poverty, and therefore child poverty, is masked by household statistics, which wrongly assume an equal distribution of household income (Close the Gap, 2018, 'Women, work and poverty in Scotland: What you need to know'). Women's financial dependence on men increases their risk of poverty, and for victim-survivors of domestic abuse, it makes it more difficult to leave an abusive relationship. Improving access to affordable childcare will improve women's financial independence and resilience. In this way, additional funded hours bring positive longer-term benefits to women's equality by challenging gender roles and other inequalities within the home.

Recommendations

- Board that Scottish Government should set out a radical childcare ambition for this parliamentary term (If not now, when? - Social Renewal Advisory Board report: January 2021).
- Work towards an entitlement to 50 hours per week of funded, good quality, flexible Early Learning 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 registered out of school care entitlement, with qualified childcare workers 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.
- An integrated childcare offer should also include provision that meets the needs of disabled children and children with Additional Support Needs.
- The UK Government should extend the support for childcare costs through Universal Credit to those in training or education to remove barriers to entering into work, and cover 100% of costs.

Answer to question 5

What improvements to public transport could support parents?

Transport is an important issue for low-income families, including many single parent families, because of its potential impact on income, household expenditure and mitigating the effects of poverty, as well as the ability to access opportunities and other services.

In OPFS's 2022 research on the cost-of-living crisis, 22.3% said they could no longer afford the cost of travel and a further 33.6% said it had become extremely difficult to afford. Participants reported that transport costs were acting as a barrier to their access to work and job or training opportunities, childcare, appointments, activities for children, and lower cost supermarkets.

Some of the comments shared by parents as part of this research were:

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

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

"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."

“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.”

Evidence from Transport Scotland shows that people in low-income households are more likely to use buses. 44% of people with an income of less than £10,000 travelled by bus at least once a week, compared to 16% of those with an income over £40,000 (‘Transport and Poverty in Scotland’, Poverty and Inequality Commission, 2019).

Poverty Alliance and Oxfam found that, for people seeking employment, the cost of transport was a major consideration and limited the scope of feasible employment options (Poverty and transport event: Summary report, 2019). It also found that for families with children in particular, transport is a major source of pressure on household budgets and limits opportunities.

Improving access to public transport also has implications for women’s equality. Research by the Women’s Budget Group (‘Briefing: Public Transport and Gender’, 2018) found that women are more likely to use buses than men. There is evidence that women are more likely to make multiple, shorter journeys in a day to balance work with taking children to and from school, childcare or activities. Current public transport routes tend to favour commuters working core business hours during the week, as opposed to those working part-time and carrying out unpaid care (both of which are more likely to apply to women). This makes reducing the cost of public transport, as well as the accessibility and suitability of routes, a gender equality issue.

Safety is also a factor in women’s access to public transport, as recent research by Transport Scotland (‘Women’s and girls’ views and experiences of personal safety when using public transport’, 2023) found that women and girls are being forced to adapt their own behaviour and change their travel habits in order to feel safe on public transport. The research found that all of the women who took part agreed they felt safer travelling during the day and during the week.

All of these barriers can be compounded for women impacted by multiple inequalities, for example: BAME women’s experiences of racist abuse can impact on decisions around travel; women with insecure immigration status, many of whom are single parents, have very limited access to resources; disabled women are more likely to face barriers to accessing transport due to a lack of suitable provision, such as wheelchair spaces; and women under 25 start from a position of being financially worse-off because they receive a lower rate of Universal Credit.

Those in rural areas also face greater barriers because access to public transport

is limited. In a consultation with single parents to inform the Scottish Government's National Strategy, OPFS found that a majority of parents relied on buses, while parents living in more rural areas had seen bus services cut in recent years and were having to take multiple buses to get to the nearest supermarket. For low-income families without access to a car, these barriers can make the logistics of fitting in paid work with their responsibilities as a parent near impossible.

Recommendations

- Extend free bus travel to everyone receiving Universal Credit and other low-income benefits to remove a real barrier to work, education and childcare. The Everyone Aboard campaign from the Poverty Alliance which makes this call has been supported by over 120 organisations across Scotland.
 - Provide free travel passes for children living in low-income families to travel to school (this should include trains so that it is accessible to those who don't live near suitable bus routes).
 - 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 design of buses and trains for people getting on and off with wheelchairs, prams and small children should be improved.
 - The training of public transport staff (particularly bus drivers) should include single parent awareness.
 - 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 reduce fares.
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Answer to question 6.

What can the Scottish Government do to increase the supply of well-paid, secure employment that works for parents?

Increasing flexible working opportunities, including part-time jobs in higher-paid roles, is essential to lifting families out of poverty, particularly single parent families.

Scotland's labour market is not working for single parents, according to OPFS research commissioned by JRF (2021) on 'Freeing low-income single parents from in-work poverty'. The research found that there is limited availability of job opportunities that would allow single parents to meet their caring responsibilities and exit poverty, especially in regions where single parents are more likely to live.

JRF analysis ('UK Poverty 2020/21') finds that single parents in work are consistently the family type most likely to face in-work poverty and are more likely to be working in a low-wage sector and on lower hours. In OPFS's 'Living without a Lifeline' research (2022), one in five (40.9%) single parents in paid work said they were finding it extremely difficult to afford food or could no longer afford it, while over half said the same of electricity (56.2%), gas (52.8%) and travel (55.2%).

Single parents are more likely to be working part-time to balance their caring responsibilities. As working part-time is often seen to be incompatible with higher paid roles, this means single parents are frequently forced to work below their skill level to achieve the flexibility they need. A quarter of children in poverty in single parent families (23%) live in families where the parent works part-time.

A lack of flexibility also forces many single parents to work fixed hours to balance work and childcare commitments. This lack of flexibility means single parents are not only unable to work additional hours, but they are also prevented from taking up skills training - key factors associated with limiting opportunities for progression.

There is a higher proportion of single parents living in the older industrial regions of Scotland, especially in Dundee City, North Ayrshire, Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire, and Glasgow City. Single parent families are more likely to live in deprived areas. In the most deprived decile, more than five in 10 (53%) of families are single parent families, while in the least deprived decile, this is one in 10 (Public Health Scotland 2020, 'Child poverty in Scotland: priority groups - lone parent families').

Most single parents are women, so gender inequality is a key issue. Women make up the majority of low paid workers in Scotland and the gender pay gap is a key factor in women's higher levels of poverty. Women are more likely to be in poverty than men; are more likely to experience in-work poverty; find it harder to escape poverty and are more likely to experience persistent poverty than men. These trends have been intensified by the impact of COVID-19. Tackling women's inequality at work is therefore a critical aspect of tackling single parent poverty and child poverty. This should include addressing occupational segregation and the undervaluation of female-dominated sectors such as caring professions.

Recommendations

- Support the public sector to create more quality, flexible vacancies (flexible in terms of offering hours that suit single parents and options such as job sharing; quality in terms of protecting them from poverty through fair wages which keep pace with inflation), 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'.
- Work with employers to reduce inflexibility and judgemental attitudes towards single parents which is locking them out of jobs and opportunities.
- New opportunities will become available through the just transition as more green jobs are created. A greater focus is needed on ensuring women are being equipped to access these roles, including upskilling and reskilling opportunities which take account of gendered barriers to training and development, and promoting inclusive workplace practices in these sectors, such as flexible working.
- Addition of 'single-parent supporter' to the Scottish Business Pledge. This should include a commitment to flexible working and a 'single parent friendly' provision which would promote culture change efforts in favour of single parents across the Scottish labour market.
- Encourage the UK Government to strengthen workers' rights, for example by introducing a requirement for all employers to give workers four weeks' notice of shifts, with guaranteed full payment if shifts are cancelled; a guaranteed right to a 16 hour per week minimum contract for all workers - except in cases where employers can evidence genuine need for contracts of less than 16hours - which can only be reduced at the request of the worker; and a guaranteed right for all workers to a contract that accurately reflects their average hours worked.
- Employers, Scottish Government and the third sector should jointly implement an employment engagement strategy tailored for single parents.

Answer to question 8.

What steps would be helpful at ensuring those not currently employed, and are looking for work, are supported?

Background

Two thirds of children in poverty live in households where the highest income householder is in paid work. However, this figure is significantly lower for children in single parent families (40%) or families with a young mother (42%) (Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022). 14% of children in poverty with mothers under 25 and 11% with single parents are in a household where the highest income householder is unemployed (which means they are looking for paid work) - higher than any of the other priority groups. This suggests that supporting parents within these two priority groups into work could have the greatest impact on child poverty.

Single parents face a number of interacting issues which prevent them gaining good employment, such as: personal circumstances (including caring responsibilities linked to the age of the child, poor health, low educational attainment and lack of access to private transport); the design and delivery of a benefit system that discourages single parents from investing in education and boosting their earnings; limited availability of job opportunities that would allow single parents to meet their caring responsibilities and exit poverty, especially in regions where single parents are more likely to live; and limited availability of flexible, affordable childcare that would allow single parents to manage caring responsibilities with earning and learning.

Single parents not in paid employment often face additional barriers to work, over and above their caring responsibilities. Compared to single parents in employment, single parents not in paid work are:

- more likely to have low or no qualifications (65% vs 31%),
- be less likely to hold a current driving licence (31% vs 68%),
- are more likely to live in a household with three or more children (14% vs 6%),
- less likely to report their health as good or very good (58% vs 80%) (Public Health Scotland, 2020).

This is very important because single parent households with these characteristics are less likely to have a parent in work than single parent households with better qualifications, good or very good health, a current driving licence or a smaller family. Inequalities are also intersecting, which means there are multiple factors of disadvantage facing women who are single parents. For example, single mothers from the black, Asian, minority ethnic community for example experience the discrimination as women, but also as women of colour.

Single parents are more likely to have a disability - around one in four single parent households have a disabled adult, compared with around a fifth of couple parent households, and 16% have at least one child with a disability. Scottish Government statistics show that 40% of all children in single parent households have a disabled adult or child in the household. And OPFS research (2022) found that only 54.2% of single parents with a disability or long-term health condition were in paid work compared to 86% of parents where neither they nor their child have a disability or long-term health condition.

Existing employability programmes

Research by OPFS and Oxfam ('Thriving, not just surviving', 2021) found current 'support into employment' provision in Scotland has a lack of sufficient and effective employability support for single parents and carers juggling caring responsibilities with the need to secure paid work.

Action is needed from skills/training providers for enhanced single parent friendly training programmes and work placements, with the opportunity to take up permanent job roles. A recent valuation of the Scottish Government multi-million funded programme “Fair Start Scotland” (FSS) shows that the single parent performance statistics are disappointing (Fair Start Scotland: evaluation report 4 - year 3 overview, 2021).

Over the three-year period since the start of the programme single parents accounted for 9% of starts. Over years 1-3 the stats show: 2,700 single parents started with FSS; 1170 were early leavers; 1530 continued on the programme; 980 took up employment; 475 were in a job after 3 months; 335 were in a job after 6 months; and 200 were in a job after 12 months.

We believe the high numbers of single parent who do not sustain employment may have unintended consequences for parents and children - disruption to benefits and increasing the impact of debt repayments thereby increasing poverty; having to give up childcare arrangements, put in place and paid for by UC, with impacts on children; and the effect on the parents confidence levels/ mental health and wellbeing, having made the move into paid work which was not sustained.

FSS should provide within all mainstream programmes/courses tailored to single parents needs to take account of the unique challenges they face. This devolved responsibility offers an opportunity to develop an employment support service that reduces child poverty.

The Oxfam and OPFS research (2021) found that:

- Given the consistent undervaluation of unpaid care and women’s work more generally, and the fact that 58% of unpaid carers and 91% of single parents are women, an intersectional and gendered lens should inform Scotland’s employability framework. This approach would support women who are single parents and carers into decent paid work and, crucially, to progress within it – thereby supporting them to increase their incomes.
- Fair Start Scotland has taken several welcome and important steps towards a more effective and fairer model. However, there is more to do to establish a distinct Scottish approach to employability. Furthermore, there is evidence that some positive elements are not being routinely implemented, and qualitative research has found a reluctance to invest in more intensive interventions owing to the programme’s payment structures.
- The Scottish Government should continue to use its powers to significantly accelerate delivery of a distinctive Scottish approach to employability, drawing on the effective and innovative approaches delivered by the third sector in pockets across the country.

Many single parents do not fit referral criteria within the current employability programmes. We find that these can be restrictive in nature due to specific parameters

being set by either funders or partnerships. Whilst the intention of the design may be to allow the programme to have a focused approach aimed at targeting those that may require the most support, it can lead to a more prescriptive model and an obligation to sign up on the part of the potential participant. It also means that single parents, who

are at the point in their journey where returning to work is being actively considered, do not have access if they do not fit the criteria.

'No One Left Behind', the Scottish Government's strategy for placing people at the centre of the design and delivery of employability services, aims to be person centred and responsive to individual needs. However, we fear that a very individualised model risks losing sight of the structural and systemic barriers particular groups, including single parents encounter in the labour market. The programme has not yet been evaluated and the statistics on outcomes for single parents don't appear to be available.

Integrated employability and family support model

OPFS has developed an 'Integrated Employability and Family Support Model' tailored to single parents who are experiencing social and economic exclusion and who wish to increase their qualifications and skills for future employment but who initially do not feel ready to enter a more structured programme. It supports intermediate steps to employment, employment retention and advancement, and recognition of the importance of where single parents live.

The model, developed over many years of experience, offers the following distinguishing features:

- The capability to offer crucial interventions at the point of transitions in single parents' lives, taking careful account of the 'fluid' circumstances of parents and children and responding to where they are and what matters to them.
- Ensuring staff have skills, abilities and training on single parent issues to offer specialist services which enable single parents to negotiate changes in their lives.
- Service delivery is independent, holistic, asset based, family focused and non-judgemental and aims to give support to children as well as parents.
- Understanding of what prevents single parents with caring responsibilities from engaging with support and designing our delivery around these barriers. For example, widening the places participant outreach is delivered, providing better access to childcare support, covering travel costs, and running activities at times that fit with the school run.
- Through a partnership approach, the model adds value to existing provision and helps to ensure that information is shared across relevant partners, making progression across different services more seamless.
- Support to access appropriate childcare.
- Alleviate the impact of living in circumstances of poverty and provide a staged approach to building participation, motivation, and optimism for the future.
- Promoting high-quality, part-time and flexible work which would meet the needs of single parents and unlock access to more opportunities for them.

Research for the JRF (2021) notes that multiple single parents stated that working with OPFS and other third sector or local interventions boosted their confidence. Their explanation was that unlike generic employability programmes or Job Centre (DWP) interventions, the appreciation and empathy towards their circumstances created a safe space to grow and learn, and to prepare themselves for returning to or remaining in the labour market.

Feedback shared by single parents included:

“You need support from all angles, a package – not only employment – but benefits because they might change when you move into employment. People have no clue about Universal Credit, and nothing is explained to them.”

“I wanted to study to access better-paid jobs. I didn’t want to work in cleaning jobs all my life. I wanted more for myself and my son. And I loved my son watching me studying because to him that became a part of life, something to take example from. Now he takes that with him in his own life.”

Barriers in local commissioning priorities

Unfortunately, we often must adapt our delivery to fit within the parameters of the local commissioning priorities which work against this approach, for example:

- Service specifications that predetermine the outputs and outcomes expected for the service contract.
- Payment models designed to reward job outcomes (e.g., work first approach).
- Service specifications outlining the delivery model to be used, leaving little room for taking a flexible approach and co-design the support needed with the parents.
- Large scale tendering e.g., Fair Start Scotland. Whilst in theory, partnership working with smaller third sector orgs who are rooted in and experts in their communities is encouraged, this has been difficult to achieve as any funding available has been offered on a call-off or spot purchase basis and we do not have the resources to sit with spare capacity to take on small pieces of work at short notice. Not to mention that the short term, time limited interventions likely to be sub-contracted e.g., a PSD course, is at odds to the relationship-based approach we know works.

Recommendations

- Scottish Government, through Fair Start Scotland AND PESF, should offer bespoke, holistic initiatives for single parents to move into, stay and advance in employment such as a Scotland-wide employability pathway specifically for single parents.
- ‘Demand-led’ training and employer-facing activities should be rooted within the local labour market to maximise the additionality of programmes.
- Employment outcomes should be assessed qualitatively as well as quantitatively. Jobs should be well-paid, sustainable, and should offer opportunities for progression.
- Third sector organisations should be part of broad partnerships, rooted in and expert in their local communities. To this end, tendering processes should prioritise and incentivise partnership-working and high-quality services.
- Provide significant increases in funding for the Parental Employment Support Fund (PESF) to make the progress needed to meet Scotland’s statutory targets on child poverty.
- Introduce an equivalent to the Youth Guarantee for parents from the Child Poverty Delivery Plan priority family groups 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.
- Those in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment should be proactively supported to access parental employment support, should they need it.
- Single parents should be offered career support and advice at key stages of their children’s lives, for example when their youngest child begins primary school.
- Support working single parents to retain employment and advance in their career and have a work-life balance that avoids time-poverty.
- Increase the income of families identified in the Child Poverty Act through newly devolved social security powers - social security has a key role to play in supporting single parents to move into and sustain paid work.
- Scottish Government also has an important role to play in reducing living costs associated with in-work poverty, particularly in relation to: the cost of the school day and school holidays, housing costs, childcare and public transport.

Answer to question 9.

Do you feel that parents who want to improve their employment options have sufficient access to education and training in your area? If not, what could be improved?

- Single parents face significant barriers to entering, remaining and succeeding in Further or Higher Education. Single parents are disproportionately lower qualified than other groups, which can hold them back from fulfilling their potential; limiting their ability to find employment, restricting their earning capability, and reducing opportunities for progression. Of single parents in employment, two-thirds enter the lowest paid occupations, which has a significant impact on their ability to earn enough to keep themselves and their children out of poverty.
- Some of the key issues raised with us by single parents about barriers to education and training are a lack of knowledge and 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.
- A lack of flexible, affordable childcare is also major barrier to education and training. Parents with young children find it easier to attend if their child can access an onsite nursery. These places are taken up very quickly, and the allocation of college childcare funds can be quickly allocated.
- Support for learning and wellbeing support are also key issues, as many single parents will have been out of education for a longer period of time and confidence in returning to education can be a major barrier. Parents have told us that having support through classes in confidence building, essay writing skills and study/research skills, peer mentors, and opportunities to learn in smaller groups would help them to succeed in Further Education.
- Additionally, welfare-to-work policies underpinning benefit conditionality discourage unemployed single parents from pursuing further education. Government-funded courses for jobseekers predominately focus on addressing basic skills gaps and job search techniques, with a view to moving claimants into work as quickly as possible. This approach can undermine the work aspirations of single parents and stifle ambition – effectively preventing them from getting a job that offers better pay, greater security and improved chances of progression.
- Moreover, poverty and the risk of further indebtedness is a barrier to many single parents contemplating a return to further education, despite the longer-term benefits associated with skills acquisition. More action is needed to take a longer-term approach to supporting single parents into sustainable employment.

Recommendations

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- 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.
 - Taster/pathway courses could help parents who are unsure of where to start and want to develop their confidence.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - Education and training providers should offer more flexible course times and locations such a community-based learning hubs and online courses which can be accessed at different times.
 - More training opportunities and work placements should be made available which are not restricted by age.
 - Reflect the distinct needs of students who are single parents in the Scottish Government's Adult Learning Strategy.

Answer to question 10.

What can employers do to offer more family friendly and flexible working conditions?

A key theme which arises when single parents are asked what would make it easier for them to take up employment is greater flexibility from employers, and an understanding that many single parents do not have family members who they can ask for free or short-notice childcare. Research (Cotell and Harding, 2018) has found that among those with experience of balancing caring and work, the single biggest enabler was having a sympathetic and flexible manager.

In our Living Without a Lifeline report (2022) single parents said:

"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."

"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."

Parents in our research with JRF (2021) said:

"I have seen what it's like, they tell you they are flexible but they mean you need to be flexible for them. But it should go both ways. You worry when you ask about flexibility or time off for your kids, you know they will just replace you."

"I had to go through a disciplinary because I had to leave work to take my daughter to the hospital and be off for a few days even though I explained."

Our research with Oxfam (2021) found that employer-engagement is often an after-thought for employability programmes, and often represents a small proportion of a programme's activities and resources. The interventions we examined, however, show the huge benefits of early employer engagement: 'demand-led' training that takes account of local skills gaps and employers' needs is seen as more effective by both evaluation outputs and wider academic literature.

Recommendations for employers

- Offer more job-sharing opportunities and flexible working options, and clearly advertise this in recruitment materials.
- Include policies on family-friendly working in HR policies, including specific detail on how this will enable and support single parents to work and be treated equally within the organisation.
- Make use of guidance and toolkits offered by organisations like Close the Gap and Working Families to ensure policies, procedures and practice promote equality and eliminate barriers to women with children entering and progressing in the workplace; including women impacted by multiple inequalities, such as single parents, BAME women and disabled women.

- Commit to giving workers four weeks' notice of shifts, with guaranteed full payment if shifts are cancelled.
- Guarantee a 16 hour per week minimum contract for all workers – except in cases where employers can evidence genuine need for contracts of less than 16 hours - which can only be reduced at the request of the worker.
- Guarantee all workers a contract that accurately reflects their average hours worked.
- Use their appraisal system to encourage single parents within their workforce to consider progression and offer coaching to build the confidence of single parents to progress.
- Proof policies and practices to ensure they do not unfairly penalise single parent in keeping with the 'Vision & Framework for Fair Work in Scotland'.
- More workplace creches or support from employers with flexible childcare.

Question 11.

What do employers need from the Scottish Government to offer family friendly and flexible working conditions?

There are a number of changes which should be made to reserved employment law to make secure, flexible and fairly paid work the standard across all sectors. However, there are also important actions the Scottish Government can take to support and encourage employers to implement these conditions.

In our research with Oxfam (2021) identified certain success factors to such employer-facing activities. Firstly, activities appear to be more effective when pitched in a business-friendly language. Findings from Marks and Start and Making It Work provide a provisional template for this: using a language of 'untapped resources', improved retention and positive local reputation and coverage might help to convince employers.

Secondly, programmes undertaking employer-facing activities should be wary of being seen as too 'combative': arguments predicated purely on employers' statutory requirements were seen as unnecessarily adversarial. Instead, a positive message combining legislative, moral and business-friendly arguments was seen as effective.

Thirdly, evaluations found that some employers felt that programmes lacked an understanding of business-needs. It was therefore seen to be effective to employ staff with business experience who can command the respect of local employers and speak authoritatively on the business benefits of making their policies and procedures more single parent and carer-friendly.

Recommendations

- Make use of immediate financial mechanisms of procurement, conditional business support and financial incentives to instil fair employment practices, including flexible working.
 - Invest in single parents/carer specific employability programmes delivered with employers.
 - Long-term activity through the Scottish Government's Fair Work agenda to achieve cultural change.
 - Provide a programme training and guidance for employers to be able to better respond to, value and understand single parents' lived experiences.
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Answer to question 12.

What changes should the Scottish Government prioritise to help people who want to work more hours?

Priority actions which the Scottish Government should take are:

- A universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged 6 months and above that is free at the point of use for all families.
 - 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.
 - Ensure that families are not left worse off as a result of taking on more hours of work. For example, by: increasing the income of families identified in the Child Poverty Act through newly devolved social security powers; reducing or subsidising transport costs; raising the thresholds of entitlement to free school meals and school clothing grants to all children whose parents receive Scottish Child Payment.
 - Raise the qualifying earnings limit for the new Scottish Carers Assistance payment to ensure that carers can work at least 16 hours at National Living Wage.
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Answer to question 13.

What could the Scottish Government prioritise to help parents into work and better paid jobs?

Priority actions which the Scottish Government should take are:

- A universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged 6 months and above that is free at the point of use for all families.

- 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.
- Offer bespoke, holistic initiatives through Fair Start Scotland AND PESF for single parents to move into, stay and advance in employment such as a Scotland-wide employability pathway specifically for single parents.
- 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 guarantee to fully fund childcare costs for single parents undertaking their first level 3 qualifications.
- Support the public sector to create more quality, flexible vacancies (flexible in terms of offering hours that suit single parents and options such as job sharing; quality in terms of protecting them from poverty through fair wages which keep pace with inflation), directly and through procurement and economic development.
- Support employers in the private sector to create more quality, flexible vacancies.

Answer to question 14.

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

It is vital to ensure policy and delivery coherence across employability, childcare, social security and family support to ensure single parents' needs are being met across the policy portfolio.

For example, while expanding access to funded, flexible childcare is essential to supporting parents into work, unless this is accompanied by an increase in flexible, well-paid, family friendly job opportunities, our recommended childcare principles of choice for families and prioritising positive outcomes for children will not be met. It is important to acknowledge that for some families, particularly single parents and those with young children, working full-time may not be suitable, and flexible working opportunities will therefore remain essential to allowing parents to balance their family life with paid work which can lift themselves and their children out of poverty.

The aim of changes in Universal Credit announced in March 2023 which require parents to be available for 30 hours of work from the time their youngest child turns three (a dramatic increase from the current 16 hours) is to remove the choice from parents. For single parents, this means families having no choice but to put pre-school children aged three and four into childcare for more than 30 hours per week. For the many parents without the option of arranging informal childcare with family members, this would necessitate paying for childcare beyond the funded 30 hours, once commuting time and breaks are taken into account.

Evidence suggests that elements of the current reserved social security system are more likely to move more disadvantaged single parents further away from the labour market.



One Parent Families Scotland

changing lives, challenging poverty

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