



# Single Parent Families Impact Report

Issue 25

The Cost of Christmas

December 23

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# Introduction

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OPFS regularly collects the experiences of single parents across Scotland. Through our six local services, national advice and information services and online support we capture key areas of concern for single parent families.

Our bi-monthly monitoring reports uses this data to describe the impact of the cost-of-living crisis including rising energy costs and food bills. We also still recognise the ongoing impact on single parent families of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are five elements to our impact tracking model:

- **Gathering knowledge:** Parents' experiences are systematically collected and analysed.
- **Monitoring emerging issues:** Emerging issues are described and highlighted.
- **OPFS response:** Our services respond by working to meet the needs identified.
- **Dissemination and communication:** Emerging issues communicated to key influencers.
- **Single Parent Proofing:** Using single parent feedback to inform the development, implementation and evaluation of policy and practice so that they respond effectively to the needs of single parents.

The two categories referred to in this short report reflect the key issues which single parents have contacted us about over the last two months and are linked to a spotlight, focused on the cost of Christmas:

**1. Health and wellbeing**

**2. Money and family income**

## Main findings

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*Poverty is not only about the income poverty, it is about the deprivation of economic and social rights, insecurity, discrimination, exclusion and powerlessness. That is why human rights must not be ignored but given even greater prominence in times of economic crisis.*

**Irene Khan, former Secretary-General of Amnesty International, 2010.<sup>1</sup>**

Over the course of November and December, the financial difficulties experienced by families we work with remained extremely challenging and a constant threat to their dignity as human beings. We know that these struggles are compounded by the worries of upcoming winter bills, rising energy costs and the approaching festive period.



*I have no savings for any gifts for the children as it has been impossible to save. I don't want to use credit cards to pay for gifts. What can I do?*

*Single parent with two children, Glasgow*

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<sup>1</sup> Borgen Project, 2014. Global Poverty. [Available online](#).



*Making the monthly budget stretch to cover at least one item on the children's Santa lists. Keeping the smile on your face for the children, so not to spoil the Christmas cheer. Being in debt to cover the Christmas Dinner. Children are only young once; they want what they see on the TV. To them it's a magical time of year and it's trying to give them a slice of this, so they have memories to look back on.*

*Single parent with two children, Dundee*



*This year is looking very different for me as I lost my mum this year, she would usually make up what was missing for the kids and help me out but now, she's gone I don't have that support and am struggling as the kids have lost so much already I don't want them to have less at Christmas.*

*Single parent with two children, Dundee*

Christmas ought to be a time of great joy and celebration with loved ones. However, for many single parent families the happiness associated with the festive season is sidetracked all too often with worry and trepidation for the present and the future. Buying presents for the children, worrying about child contact arrangements or having enough food on the table are often issues which are fraught with stress, stigma, and hardship.

For the families that we support at OPFS we continue to tailor our services around family need including financial and emotional to support family wellbeing.

# 1. Health & wellbeing

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The financial pressures on families at Christmas increases significantly. Parents health and wellbeing continues to be affected by the continual financial stress and strain that they are under.



*...I am feeling lonely and isolated with everything...*

*Single parent mother, Dundee.*



*Parents are desperate for help with the cost of Christmas. They have no savings for gifts or food at this time of year. This is causing stress, anxiety, and upset.*

*Family support worker, Dundee*



*I am struggling to feel happy as we move into the festive period because we barely have enough to live on and now with the added pressure of buying presents, I feel very stressed...*

*Single parent, Glasgow*



*Parents mental health is badly affected by the cost of living, and it is leaving many very anxious, worried, and stressed.*

*Family support worker, Glasgow*

## 2. Money and family income

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The current financial landscape is leaving too many single parents living hand to mouth. November and December feedback reflects this:



*The cost of Christmas for me is exhausting. I struggle with money and extra food. Trying to make sure my children have what they ask for means I go without for a few weeks into January.*

*Single parent, Dundee*



*The biggest challenge at Christmas is getting enough for your child. Well, it is to me anyway making sure there is enough under the tree.*

*Single Dad of one, Dundee*



*My daughter is older now and at high school so the pressure to buy more expensive gifts is really hitting hard. I have always struggled at Christmas but when they are wee it is easy to get cheap things that look a lot and I've had help in previous years from gift appeals but now she is older she wants more expensive things that don't look like much and there isn't much support with gift appeal for older kids.*

*Single parent of one, Dundee.*



*I save all year for Christmas using a supermarket saving card before it would more than cover the Christmas shop and take the pressure off but this year I will have to put extra to it.*

*Single Mum of five, Dundee*

These comments from parents do not appear to reflect positively on a social model which proclaims a supposed cohesive and inclusive society. Rather they suggest a society which favours the wealthy and isolates the poorest.

## Spotlight – Cost of Christmas

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A poll by Save the Children<sup>2</sup> found that two in five adults across the UK are very anxious about upcoming costs.

<sup>2</sup> Save the Children, 2023. Parents Struggling to Afford Christmas Presents for their Children due to Financial Pressures. Available online at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/christmas-presents-for-children>



- Two thirds (62%) are planning to cut back on presents this year.
- A third (33%) will cut back on their Christmas dinner.
- Almost a third (31%) will limit their social interaction with family/friends over the period.
- Nearly a quarter (23%) said they will be reliant on a credit card.
- Almost 1 in 6 (16%) said they'll have to keep the heating off when it is cold.
- More than 1 in 10 (12%) will have to sell or pawn something to get by.
- More than 1 in 10 (12%) will have to cut back on food for the rest of the winter as a result of Christmas.<sup>3</sup>

These findings are stark, but for single parents who are not in coupled households, this is a baseline, compounded by the additional economic disadvantages that single parent families are facing daily.



*We've had people looking for money since September - a lot of worries about Christmas but it's been a lot of people who had previously had support looking for more support this year.*

*Advice & Information Manager in Edinburgh*

Our Family Support Workers, based in Dundee, noted the following reflections,



*The main challenges are keeping the home warm, eating, trying to provide gifts for the children that they want. Parents have a lot of guilt about not being able to get their children the right stuff. This could then make them get in debt by loans. It's so easy to use Klarna a 3-month payment scheme and then lose track... keeping the home heated while everyone is off school and work. Isolation and feeling alone when they don't have extended family to share this day with.*

*Family Support Worker, Dundee*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 2023.



*My view is as above; this time of year, is something more people are starting to dread. It's not just the gifts, and the food, it's the Christmas decorations. I do have a parent who spends Christmas himself every year. His son goes to the Mums, and he does not feel welcome*

*Family Support Worker, Dundee*



*I feel my families are struggling in general. I spoke to one family who have been buying presents for a few months, but she told me unless her child is at home her heating doesn't go on and she sits with a hoodie on... Another stated that she is organised but a lot on her shopping is on Klarna which means her debit will be carried on to 2024...*

*Family Support Worker, Dundee*

## Case Study: Advice & Information Service, East Ayrshire

Mother of five children, called into our helpline looking to see whether we could put her forward for Cash for Kids appeal or similar grants. She has spent all her Universal Credit allowances on buying presents and is now in crisis. One of our advisor's listened empathetically to her about budgeting decisions she had taken. However, the mum felt that there was more support available for the crisis items such as food and energy than there was for Christmas items. She had taken the decision not to spend her Universal Credit on essentials but rather on buying Christmas items instead.

She also spoke to the advisor about her low self-esteem, poor mental health, and wellbeing of being a mum as she felt intense disappointment at not being able to give her kids what they expected for Christmas.

The advisor gave information on crisis support available, completed a benefit check, and suggested getting in touch with her local welfare rights team to get further help and advice. She also gave the mum emotional support and spoke through her difficulties of Christmas and expectations on parents.

All of our advisors have been mentioning that there have been a few appeals for crisis support after parents have deliberately chosen to spend money on Christmas presents, knowing that they are more likely to get crisis support than support for Christmas.

## Conclusion

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This end of year report marks the November and December period, but also sums up the continuing trials and struggles that single parents face day and daily. At Christmas time, the demands on people's finances are even greater which impacts not just on household budgets but on the overall mental wellbeing of the whole family.

Despite this, there is no shortage of resilience on the part of single parents, and support on the part of services such as OPFS and like-minded charities.

Even though difficulties are often profound and persistent, many parents find the strength to overcome the challenges to provide the best for their children. They are a beacon of inspiration for their family. They teach their children how to meet and overcome adversity, develop problem-solving skills through life, learn about treating others with dignity and respect and foster aspirations for good education, employment, and a happy life.

For our part, OPFS will continue to work tirelessly to promote the human rights of single parent families, advocating for family orientated policies in our country and lobby for positive social change.

Our [Christmas appeal 2023](#) aims to support single parent families with the extra cost of Christmas and higher costs of living.

We also have a Q&A guide for Christmas advice on benefits, cost of living, and buying presents and a downloadable budget-friendly Christmas activities A to Z. [FAQs and resources for separation \(opfs.org.uk\)](#)

We would like to wish everyone particularly single parents, our staff and volunteers, our benefactors and sister charities a happy and peaceful festive season.





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

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