



Single Parent Families Impact Report

Issue 24

Asylum Seeker and Refugee
Parents

October 23



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty

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Introduction

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.

This report is organised into four broad categories. These reflect the topics single parents contacted us about over the last two months:

1. **Health and wellbeing**
2. **Money and family income**
3. **Work, education and training**
4. **Children**

Main findings

This report covers the period of September and October 2023. The spotlight topic will consider the financial challenges faced by asylum seeker/refugee parents. We know that single parent families face many challenges, many of which are structural barriers. Access to the right support, particularly services tailored for single parents can make a real difference. For families facing intersectional inequalities, including asylum seeker and refugee single parents, accessing the right support is often more difficult. These challenges can be compounded by barriers such as,

- the operations of the UK asylum system
- racism/prejudice/discrimination
- isolation/loneliness
- language difficulties
- limited access to public funds (Scottish Child Payment and other benefits)
- poor access to good quality housing.

Asylum and refugee single parents from across our different local areas, highlighted to us their challenging experiences:



All I want to do is get a job, I want life to be better for me and my children, I'm allowed to work, but with the restrictions on the types of jobs and the temporary accommodation that we live in I would have to earn a high wage to be able to afford to work.

Single parent from Glasgow



Some of the experiences that I have had with other organisations have been so frustrating and demeaning.

Single parent from Glasgow



...It wears me down thinking about my problems all the time...OPFS have helped me a lot as I was very isolated before. It's been good for me to speak with other people in my own language at hubs, make friends and have connections to home, I haven't seen my family for over 9 years now.

Single parent from Edinburgh

1. Health & wellbeing

The transition from summer to autumn is a source of great anxiety for many single parent families. The stark rise in the cost of living, for example, for heating homes, feeding the family is commonplace in the daily lives of single parents who use our services. Following on from the COVID-19 pandemic, crippling rising costs is another crisis of unprecedented proportions. The concern is that those not on low incomes become accustomed to this long-term situation while those worse off reach their breaking point.

Our engagement with single parents continually highlights the distressing reality of living hand to mouth. For asylum and refugee parents, this is doubly true:



I go to bed at night having constant stress, not knowing what is going to happen and how we are going to survive day on day. It is such a worry, and it never goes away.

Single parent from Dundee



Living with uncertainty, makes me feel anxiety and afraid. I am scared we will get refused asylum again and be sent back to our country.

Single parent from Falkirk



I am not coping with all these rising prices and really worried about having to turn the heating on because it will be expensive. I am living on my nerves.

Single parent from Dundee

2. Money and family income

Particularly, since 2020 and COVID-19, we have moved from one crisis to another. From a social security situation, short-term fixes and one-off payments have not fully tackled the deep-rooted challenges which affect low-income households. Public funds include access to a range of social security

benefits, tax credits and housing assistance. However, the majority of asylum seeker and refugee parents do not have recourse to public funds. The UK Government published figures¹ showing the amount of applications received for this financial aid. During September and October, we supported parents experiencing unsuccessful application claims, often as a result of a difficulty in navigating a complex welfare system which they have sparse knowledge of. The language barrier also plays a part.



We don't receive the Scottish Child Payment. We don't have access to it as we are Asylum Seekers. It isn't clear to know what we can and cannot access. Not knowing can be stressful.

Single parent from Glasgow



When I first separated from my husband, I had no idea about benefits and my English was poor, this made it easy for him to make all the claims leaving me with no access to any of the carers allowances or disability benefits my son is entitled to, my English is poor, and my confidence is low, without the help of OPFS and my church friends I would not be able to continue to pursue this matter as I feel the system is not fair and there is little support or patience for people who are not confident speaking English.

Single mum, Dundee

¹ House of Commons Library, 2023. No recourse to public funds. Research briefing. [Available online.](#)



As Asylum Seekers we have no recourse to public funds and do not receive any benefits. Our only income is from the Home Office which is barely enough to get by.

Single parent from Edinburgh

3. Work / education and training

Over the course of September and October parents told us about the importance of,

- finding work
- staying in employment
- flexible working arrangements to cover the needs of childcare
- the recent struggles with school strikes occurring across different local authorities.

Employment can be the key to a better quality of life, a catalyst for positive wellbeing and a way to improve family income. By not having access to employment opportunities, asylum/refugee parents are being prevented from taking an active role in their communities. This is having a negative impact on their overall mental wellbeing:



I would love to be able to work again. I was a teacher in Nigeria. Not working makes you feel low and sometimes negative about yourself.

Single parent from Edinburgh



I just want to work and provide for my family, it's unfair. I feel so helpless...

Single parent from Falkirk

4. Children

Like previous impact reports the issue of child contact is a recurring theme for a number of single parents. Parents report challenges dealing with the non-resident parent withholding child maintenance payments. In some situations, threats to withhold child maintenance is used as a form of coercive control.



My ex-husband is still trying to control me although we been separated for over a year. He is using economic abuse to do this. He took my children's birthday money and spent it on himself. My kids were really upset.

Single parent from Dundee



My ex-partner just pays child maintenance whenever he feels like it. He is self-employed. I am really struggling with finances and depressed about this.

Single parent from Glasgow

Spotlight: Asylum seeker and refugee parents

Across our local services, OPFS supports many asylum seeker and refugee families. In Glasgow, for example, over a quarter (28%) of all single parents supported are mothers from ethnic minority backgrounds, refugees and asylum seekers from various countries including Ukraine, Poland, Romania, China, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sudan, Eritrea, and Nigeria.

The inequalities that they and their children face are very real:



It is very hard to manage children's expectation, they feel different from other children and isolated.



The children are experiencing racism in the local area; therefore, they cannot play locally, and I have no means of taking them out.

The case studies below provide examples of people's lived experiences and the experiences of the family support workers in trying to help people achieve positive outcomes.

(To protect parent's identity pseudonyms have been used in place of their own name.)

1. Glasgow - Violet, single parent with three children

Violet's family, of three, are from Nigeria, fleeing domestic violence and fear for their lives.

The family have been in the UK for five years, their asylum claim was initially rejected, and they are now going through the appeal process. Violet cannot access a work permit due to asylum claim being rejected and has also been declined a college placement due to her status. This is having a detrimental impact on Violet's mental health and well-being. She is engaging with OPFS employability service to explore volunteering opportunities. However, if an opportunity arises travel costs could be a barrier to accessing this.

The family is residing in home office accommodation. Furniture and household provisions are limited. The house has mould and dampness which has ruined beds, wardrobes, and clothing. The family have limited interaction with the housing officer and have waited significant periods of time for these issues to be addressed. The home is sparse; however, this family have received donations from their local church including a television, table, and chairs.

All three children (13, 11, & 9 years) are thriving at school despite the hardship they are experiencing. The children reported being racially abused and discriminated against because of their ethnicity within the local community. This experience has increased isolation and reduced integration into the local community.

Violet's Glasgow Family Support Worker - reflections

As a Family Support Worker providing support to asylum seeker and/ refugee families there are some immediate challenges that we face. Firstly, communication can be a challenge due to the language barrier, understanding an individual's needs and what supports they already have in place can be vague.

The fact that we are limited in the financial assistance/support we can access for Asylum seekers i.e., Scottish Welfare Fund, can be frustrating and it is difficult explaining why their children are not entitled to the Scottish Child Payment for example. I feel this creates a divide within

society, asylum seeker families are not treated equally, and they feel it. Children feel the polarisation with their peers in term of clothing, food (lunch, snacks), access to activities etc.

The main challenges for asylum seekers, from my experience is a lack of financial support (benefits) and the opportunity to engage actively in employment. These are the main routes out of poverty and are not achievable for some asylum seeker families. Therefore, it can be difficult to support individuals to change their situation or circumstance. Despite the challenges asylum seekers face they remain so positive and hopeful. It is so inspiring to see people that face such adversity daily, strive for a better safer life! I feel privileged to have the opportunity to work with and support families seeking asylum.

2. Glasgow - Rhonda, single parent with three children

Rhonda, a single mum to three children, currently living in Glasgow from Nigeria.

The family fled Nigeria for a better quality of life due to the death of her husband and father of her children. In Nigeria, if the next of kin is a female or a wife, then they do not inherit anything in the man's will. Therefore, this family were left with nothing. After the death of her husband, Rhonda was forced into a marriage with her own cousin, so decided to flee and seek asylum. This was an extremely traumatic experience, resulting in PTSD.

The family has been in Scotland since 2019, living in a home provided by the Home Office. Rhonda is actively working with an Immigrations lawyer, whom she found herself, to attain her Leave to Remain status. Their asylum claim was initially rejected, and they are now going through the appeal process. Rhonda was only recently offered a work permit after years of not

being able to work or access education. She has now accepted a job in the NHS and attends college part-time.

Rhonda is engaging with OPFS employability service who supported her with courses to access employment and education. However, until Rhonda's work starts, she still has no recourse to public funds. Therefore, this family relies on OPFS Welfare Rights service to support charitable applications and crisis support.

Rhonda also engages with the Family Support service to help manage the stress of the appeal process, and past traumatic experiences. Groups provided by OPFS have allowed Rhonda and her family to socialise and meet other families with similar experiences living in Glasgow.

The family is residing in home office accommodation just now. Furniture and household provisions are limited and basic. Rhonda was happy in the area and with the size of home initially provided for her family. Rhonda and her family were in a 4-bed tenement flat to begin with, which allowed each child to have their own room and for Rhonda to have her own space as an adult. However, she has since been moved to the opposite end of Glasgow. She has been placed in a much smaller house where her teenage children are required to share a bedroom. Rhonda is also unfamiliar with the area and has had to change church and schools for her children. This has caused the family to be socially isolated and have had to learn to adapt to this new area.



The Home Office decided to move me and my family from the flat we settled in when we arrived to a much smaller one. I had to move my children's school and I wasn't sure of the area. Things like this can be very stressful for me and my family.

Rhonda's Family Support Worker – reflections

Firstly, communication can be a challenge due to the language barrier, understanding an individual's needs and what supports they already have in place can be vague. Not all organisations have the facilities and time to meet Asylum Seekers face to face, therefore they lack an understanding of the situation and lived experiences faced by Asylum Seekers.

The fact we are limited in the financial assistance/support we can access for Asylum seekers i.e., Scottish Welfare Fund, can be frustrating and its difficult explaining why their children are not entitled to Scottish Child Payment for example. Some clients are not aware that they might not be entitled, so it is as though the support worker must deliver the bad news. I feel this creates a divide within society, asylum seeker families are not treated equally or provided with the same opportunities.

Children are expected to thrive and fit in to schools when they do not have the same resources as other students such as the latest technology, items, and clothes. This automatically puts the children at a disadvantage, reduces confidence and can result in bullying and often racism.

The main challenges for Asylum Seekers, from my experience, are a lack of financial support (benefits) and the opportunity to engage in employment. These are the main routes out of poverty and are not achievable for some ethnic minority families. This makes it difficult to support families in these situations and often we are so limited in what we can do. Time is spent waiting on leave to remain to be granted which can often take years.

3. Dundee - Cara, single parent

Cara's family support worker explains:

The refugee family I supported (Cara's family) now have indefinite right to remain in the UK. For me the biggest challenge was the language barrier. This parent was supported to access ESOL classes and although her English has improved, she still relies heavily on her children to translate. I find that some of the topics we need to discuss are not always appropriate for the children to know such detail about. I have also found that the language barrier can result in miscommunications when discussing complex issues such as benefits.

I supported Cara to apply for the health element of Universal Credit and Adult Disability Payment (ADP) She was successful in being awarded the health element of Universal Credit, but she was refused ADP as her GP did not give supporting information regarding the conditions she had identified. This was due to a miscommunication when interpreting her health issues.

Having access to an interpreter has been helpful at times but at others (i.e., with ADP) the wait time for an interpreter is long unless booked in advance so it was easier for me to call on her behalf with any queries she had. She can use an interpreter for medical appointments and find this useful.

The family were supported to apply for family active cards which allow them to use leisure centres, ice rink etc. across the city which reduced their isolation somewhat however this parent's health issues further impact on her social isolation as often she can find it difficult to get out and about.

Cara's Family Support Worker - reflections

I would have benefited from more training about what support refugee families are offered when they arrive in the UK, what the rules and regulations are as well as rights and responsibilities around having refugee status and what the process is for changing status is. This parent was able to access information from other people at her mosque and was very capable of acting on this information (she was a teacher in Syria).

I am sure I would have found supporting this family much more challenging if the parent was less able to access the correct information and less confident acting on it. Cara was the first refugee family I supported, and this lasted for around a year and she is still receiving support as and when required mainly around benefits and housing queries. This is much longer than the average family so having more knowledge around the issues affecting refugee families and where to access relevant support would be very helpful in managing our resources better.

In researching the spotlight topic for this report, we thought it was important to consider the experiences of other charities who work directly with asylum seeker and refugee parents. At Multi-Cultural Family Base (MCFB)² one of the services called Bright Choices works in a partnership with Aditi based in SACRO Edinburgh. Both services, Aditi, and Bright Choices: work with families from a wide range of different communities.



We want to break down stereotypes and challenge prejudices. We want a society that welcomes difference and diversity and we will advocate for families when they experience unfair discrimination.

² Multi-Cultural Family Base. Available online at: <https://www.mcfb.org.uk/about>

Bright Choices Project

Jane Ridegova, Senior Project Lead with the Bright Choices Project run by Edinburgh based charity Multi-Cultural Family Base, works with people affected by honour-based violence. They provide emotional and practical support. Jana described the work they do and the issues they deal with:

1. What challenges have you come across when supporting asylum seeker/refugee parents?

Many people are coming over to join families or straight off planes to meet their future husbands or wives for the first time... straight away it is a cultural shock for them. The weather is different to what they are used to, have no money, no family support, limited English, and they don't understand the culture. All of which pushes them into deeper isolation.

2. Can you give some examples of the main issues affecting this client group?

Many feel that they do not have enough support in Government legislation especially in cases where they feel their life is threatened.

Housing is a big issue. There are not enough places to accommodate people... temporary accommodation can be anything from a B&B, hostel, sharing room with other people with no access to a kitchen and no facilities to cook for their children the way they are used to...even if they are placed in temporary accommodation, the waiting times are something between two and three years, currently this has doubled. There is a housing crisis in Edinburgh, there are no places.

The access to food banks can be problematic if the food is not halal for instance. A lot of children nowadays have allergies to tin food so this can be problematic when it is given in a can. Others do not want to ask for help because they believe in their culture it would look like they are begging and would subsequently bring shame on their community as it highlights that

parent cannot look after their children and so brings into question their roles.

The perception of what life is like in Scotland all contributes to the fact that they do not know the system and often expectations are not met. For instance, people would not think of registering with the GP or dentist as this is something very expensive back in their own countries and not understanding 'the system', people believe they would pay a lot of money that they don't have. Communication is a major issue in a medical setting as some information could only be available on leaflets and this is not easy to understand given language barrier. Feedback we have is that leaflets are a waste of time and money in this case. Word of mouth is a more reliable source of sharing information. It is very challenging to manage these expectations.

3. Any issues or challenges with regards to service delivery?

We also work with people who are trafficked and/or smuggled into the country and in terms of safety for staff as well as for service user, it is important to ensure all the safety measures and risk assessments are up to date.

Getting funding and looking for new ways how to secure delivery of services for the most vulnerable groups and individuals can be a competitive environment, and we utterly depend on financial backing. Learning from previous challenges we, as an agency experienced, showed us importance of accepting change although sometimes people can struggle at first. The most important thing for us is the service users that we work with, and we are doing our best to maintain service delivery without disruptions. This year we celebrate 25th Anniversary, it is very powerful to see people we work with growing and achieving great things in life.

4. Any recommendations for change?

We can already see benefits from working with other organisations which gives a wider safety network for people coming to the service. Interagency collaboration allows us to make the best use of different set of skills and expertise from other colleagues.

Change can be productive for people it can point out to something that was not working for example, recruitment challenges. More infrastructure in place is needed to help retain staff.

Policy actions

Asylum seeker and refugee parents we work with have highlighted the key issues they face which prevent them having a decent standard of living and using the skills and experience they have to contribute to Scottish society. This includes worries about their families safety, prejudice, stigma, access to public funding, communication barriers and support service resources.

UK Government³

- People fleeing war and persecution should be able to seek safety in the UK no matter how they come here.
- People seeking safety should be able to live in dignity while they wait for a decision on their asylum application.
- Empower refugees through positive support to rebuild their lives and make valuable contributions to our communities.
- The UK working with other countries to do its bit to help people who are forced to flee their homes.
- Clear information on who Asylum Seekers should contact for support in terms of their immigration. Some are assigned a case worker, and some are not. The Home Office does not provide any contacts for families to access legal advice and information.
- We support the '[Lift the Ban](#)' call on the UK Government to give asylum seekers and their adult dependants the right to work: unconstrained by

³ [Who we are - Together With Refugees](#)

the Shortage Occupation List, and after they have waited six months for a decision on their initial asylum claim or further submission.

- The No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy to be scrapped.

Scottish Parliament & Government

- The establishment of a single parent cross party group in the Scottish Parliament with an associated Manifesto to link our asylum seeker and refugee parents directly with ministers from across the chamber, for their voices to be heard and to influence single parent minority ethnic focused governmental policies.
- As minority ethnic families are cited as one of the six family priority groups in the Scottish Government Second Child Poverty Delivery Plan⁴, they should be prioritised to receive adequate financial support as they are facing higher living costs and have no recourse to public funds.
- Children seeking asylum should have access to the three Best Start payments and the Scottish child Payment or equivalent.
- For all single parents, including asylum seeker and refugee parents in Scotland to receive a minimum acceptable standard of living - a Minimum Income Guarantee.
- Free public transport provisions for Asylum Seeker & Refugee families.
- Funding for provision to Increase opportunities for education and employment.
- Free Broadband (families are experiencing digital and social exclusion).

Local authorities

- Clear information on support available and a list of charitable applications/ crisis support available specifically to asylum seeker parents.
- Specific support for asylum seekers, through the Scottish Welfare Fund to access furniture and household items to make a house a home.
- Increased opportunity for education and employment, such as free courses and skills workshops that adults can access. Support prior to Asylum Seekers being issued a work permit to prepare for work, so it is not overwhelming.
- Increase awareness and opportunity to access mental health and well-being supports and services.

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/best-start-bright-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-26/pages/1/>

- All organisations should have access to an interpreter/ translator to reduce difficulties with language barriers.
- Appropriate housing conditions and housing options, families are often moved at short notice to areas they are unfamiliar with and far beyond the catchment area for their child's school etc.

Conclusion

This report portrays the lived experiences of asylum and refugee single parents as reported over the months of September and October 2023. It is evident that those in these groups are often significantly disadvantaged by systems, strategies, infrastructure, and policies which discourages difference and diversity. It fails to promote dignity and respect. We believe there is much truth in the following quote, as attributed by Mahatma Gandhi,



No culture can survive if it attempts to be exclusive.

Single parents in general, tell us that more needs to be done in terms of financial assistance, ease of access to services and employment opportunities along with better representation in Governmental policies. This is an ongoing campaign which we will continue to support partner organisations to lobby for change at all levels of government.



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

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