

A photograph of a woman and a young girl looking at a book together. The woman is on the right, wearing a light green t-shirt, and the girl is on the left, wearing a plaid shirt. They are both smiling and looking down at the book. The background is a soft, out-of-focus indoor setting.

# Single Parent Families Impact Report

Issue 31

Spotlight: Benefit Conditionality  
March 2025

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# Introduction

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

Our monitoring reports uses this data to describe the impact of inadequate social security benefits and the cost-of-living crisis including rising energy costs and food bills.

## OPFS impact tracking model

There are five parts to our impact tracking model:

- **Gathering knowledge:** single 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:** ensuring that policy and practice are informed by single parent feedback, so they are designed to effectively meet the specific needs of single parents.

## Themes

The themes for the period of January, February and March 2025, fall under the following broad headings:

1. Financial concerns and poverty
2. Sole carer & provider responsibility
3. Domestic violence/coercive control.
4. Child maintenance

## Spotlight

In each report, we spotlight a specific topic with more in-depth coverage. In this edition, the focus is on benefit conditionality.

## Main themes

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We have continued to gather data and qualitative single parent experiences through our national and local services to feed into policy developments. Over the course of this reporting period, single parents have faced several significant challenges. The cost-of-living crisis is still hitting families hard - but for single parent families, the pressure is even more intense. Rising energy bills, unaffordable fuel and increasing food costs are forcing many parents to make impossible choices just to get through the week.

Every day, we hear from single parents who are working hard yet still struggling to provide the basics for their children. These are not isolated stories - they reflect a growing reality that demands urgent attention:

- **Poverty:** single parents are disproportionately affected by poverty. Most single parents in touch with OPFS receive Universal Credit or a disability benefit, which do not cover life's essentials.
- **Employment barriers:** single parents who are employed often find that part-time work does not lift them out of poverty. They also report that the stigma and discrimination they face in the job market only adds to these challenges.
- **Childcare costs:** high childcare costs make it difficult for single parents to work full-time or pursue better-paying jobs. This issue is compounded by the lack of flexible and accessible childcare options beyond the statutory 1140 hours -for example, during school holidays.
- **Housing:** single parents who contact us for advice often struggle to find stable and affordable housing. Many live in temporary accommodation, which can be unstable and unsuitable for raising children.
- **Mental health:** the stress of managing finances, employment and childcare can take a toll on the mental health of single parents. They often face social isolation and lack access to support networks.
- **Child maintenance:** single parents tell us the current child maintenance system is often ineffective, leaving many resident parents without the financial contributions they need from the non-resident parent to support their children.

- Benefit conditionality & sanctions: the threat of sanctions causes severe financial and psychological distress. The persistent threat of sanctions causes extreme anxiety, even when not enacted.

Money concerns remain a top priority for many single parents, a theme which features strongly in this report. As 'benefit conditionality' is having a serious impact on parents, it is right that we also shine a spotlight on the impact this government policy is having on single parents.

## Key issues impacting single parents

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### 1. Financial concerns and poverty.

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Many single parents tell us that they are:

- Often worried about whether Universal Credit payments will arrive on time.
- Experiencing extra costs due to care needs, for instance, for caring for a child with a disability.
- Struggling to meet all their living costs on social security benefits that do not cover the basic essentials.



*I am a single parent caring for a child with disability and looking for help with a roofing issue and energy debt. I am really struggling to make ends meet at the moment*



*I am a single dad sharing care of the children with my ex-partner. I have lost my job and have a bad leg injury. I am struggling financially but I want to get back to work.*

We think the levels of hardship facing many single parent families is unacceptable. The lowest income households and those on Universal Credit, continue to go without the basics, including, food and warmth, to survive. The stress of financial worries impacts on other areas of life, such mental health and wellbeing and maintaining employment.

The Women's Budget Group Child (WBG) reinforces the point that "*poverty is not just a statistic - it's a crisis that affects millions of lives and holds back our society*".<sup>1</sup> Consequently, reducing child poverty is not just a social good, it's an economic necessity.

## 2. Sole carer and provider responsibilities

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We know from across our five local services that single parents' day-to-day experiences of being sole carers and providers is immensely challenging. Parents are coping with issues such as:

- Separation difficulties and the problems arising from navigating this new reality.
- Becoming a parent for the first time, often unsupported, and fear of the unknown of what is involved and where to get help
- The struggle of finding and maintaining paid work while caring for children.



*I am in the process of separating from my partner. I have been given temporary housing. This flat is very unsuitable for the two children. There are anti-social neighbours and drugs in the area. I am experiencing a lot of stress, anxiety and worry.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/womens-and-childrens-poverty-making-the-links-2/>



*I am feeling overwhelmed with an 18-week-old baby and no family or other parental support.*



*I am going back to work full time and feeling very stressed about this. How will I manage - to juggle work life and being a single mum. I have no family nearby for support. I am worried how this will affect the children as this will be a major change in their lives.*

Mothers shoulder the responsibility for their children's well-being, yet they face significant obstacles to providing for their families. It is a stark reality that of all the children living in poverty, a third are living with a single parent.<sup>2</sup> To address this problem, we must continue to campaign in support of single mothers. It is essential to tackle the structural barriers and inequalities that limit women's incomes and restrict access to services that meet their needs.

### 3. Domestic abuse

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Domestic abuse affects a significant number of the single mothers who get in touch with OPFS for advice and support. This includes physical abuse; coercive control (bullying, isolation and control); psychological and/or emotional abuse; financial abuse; harassment and online abuse.

Single parents tell us that economic abuse can be a considerable obstacle to leaving an abuser. Some tell OPFS support workers that they would have left their partner earlier but could not afford to leave because they did not have the money to do so. Often, access to finances during the relationship was controlled by their previous partner, who would either refuse to contribute their share or take money from them.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid 2025

Domestic abuse, including coercive control, significantly impacts mothers by affecting their physical health, mental health, family wellbeing, social connections, and financial stability.



*I have a non-harassment order in place which makes arrangements for contact harder. It's been agreed 50/50 care; he wants one week off and one week on. It's too long without seeing my kids. I want it to be 2-3 days at a stretch. He still has a hold over me.*



*I need advice and support about moving back to Scotland from England after escaping domestic abuse a year ago. I am very isolated and want to be near her family again. My young daughter is traumatised after witnessing domestic abuse violence by my ex-partner. I need support for this and counselling.*

## 4. Child maintenance

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living.<sup>3</sup> The UK Child Maintenance Service (CMS) is crucial in enforcing this by ensuring non-resident parents contribute financially to their children's upbringing where they are able. However, single parents contacting OPFS for advice are often dissatisfied with the Child Maintenance Service (CMS). Some of the issues discussed with our advisors include:

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<sup>3</sup> [131.-CRC-poster-A2-1pp-AW.pdf](#)



Non-payment issues: many of the single parents (mainly mothers) getting in touch said their child's other parent was not paying their full child maintenance and this non-payment was leading to financial strain on the family.

**Complexity and accessibility:** parents calling our Lone Parent Helpline said the child maintenance system is like a maze, making it difficult for them to find out about their child's rights. This complexity can prevent families from receiving the support they need.

**Financial penalties:** the 'Collect and Pay' system, where the CMS manages payments and imposes financial penalties, is often seen by parents as adding stress and creating barriers to ensuring children receive the financial support they are entitled to.

**Arrears and instability:** many resident single parents getting in touch with OPFS talked about the high levels of payment arrears, which contributed to financial uncertainty and stress for the parent with care.

**Domestic abuse:** the CMS often fails to protect single parents who have experienced domestic abuse and in some cases is making the abuse worse.

The system's inefficiencies mean that many children do not receive the financial support they need, which can intensify child poverty. These issues highlight the need for significant reforms to ensure the system better supports families and helps to reduce child poverty.



*I am finding it very difficult to agree contact arrangements with my ex-partner for our children. I wanted to know what is the recommended time that children should spend with each parent. I want the children to spend 50% of the time with dad, but dad says he can only commit to one overnight per month and two evenings per week due to work commitments.*



*Navigating the CMS while dealing with the trauma of abuse was devastating. The system needs to be more sensitive to the needs of survivors.*



*Navigating the system is a nightmare. I feel like I'm constantly fighting to get what my child deserves.*



*The CMS was supposed to help me, but it felt like another battle. The delays and lack of support made it hard to feel safe and secure.*

## Spotlight: Benefit conditionality and sanctions

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*Everything was fine and had been for ages. We were getting by and had a good routine that was working for us. This has completely blown me out the water and I'm struggling to see how I can do everything. My kids are still wee, and I want to be there to take them to school and pick them up and be there at things, but working this many hours there no way I can do this. I feel like I am letting them down and will be relying on other people to bring them up.*

In the UK, benefit conditionality refers to the requirements that benefit claimants must meet to receive welfare benefits. Failure to meet these requirements can result in sanctions, such as reduced or suspended benefits. Single parents, already having to juggle their dual roles of sole carer and breadwinner, are further disadvantaged by experiencing a welfare system which is inextricably linked to the inflexible mandatory obligation of participation in the labour market despite personal circumstances.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) statistics for 2024 provide detailed insights into lone parent Universal Credit (UC) claimants subject to conditionality.<sup>4</sup>

1. Total single parent claimants: there were approximately 1.2 million single parent claimants on UC.
2. Conditionality regimes:
  - Searching for work: around 45% of single parent claimants were in this category.
  - Working with requirements: about 30% were subject to this regime.
  - No work requirements: the remaining 25% were not required to work due to various exemptions, such as caring responsibilities or health issues.

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<sup>4</sup> [Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 to 10 October 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

These statistics highlight the significant proportion of single parents who are subject to some form of conditionality under the UC system.

Over 80% of single parents in receipt of UC are unable to meet the new 30-hour work requirements introduced in October 2023 for lead carers of 3-12-year-olds. And while Jobcentre Plus (JCP) work coach meetings are intended to support lead carers looking for work or additional hours, research reveals that 74% of single parents did not find them useful.<sup>5</sup>

The outcome of benefit conditionality on single parent families' financial circumstances and other aspects of wellbeing is a major concern. Currently, OPFS is undertaking research to investigate conditionality and the impact that this has on single parents when searching for and applying for employment. The findings will be published in June 2025.

In the meantime, here are three first-hand accounts describing parent's experiences of conditionality and its impact on them and their families. The first two cover parents' experiences of conditionality and the third provides the reflections from an OPFS family support worker.

### **Beth's story**

*Beth is a single mother of two children, aged six and eight, living in Dundee. She is currently working 16 hours per week as a waitress in a local restaurant. Since returning to work after her youngest child started school in 2023, she has been fortunate to work a regular ten till two shift, four days a week. This means that she can collect and pick up both children without the need to pay for childcare, while still receiving Universal Credit.*

*As part of her conditionality obligations, Beth was invited for a 'work commitments' review at the job centre last September. She was told during this meeting that she would be expected to increase her working hours to 30 hours per week, as 16 hours was no longer deemed an acceptable amount to work.*

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<sup>5</sup> [81% of single parents on Universal Credit can't meet tougher requirements](#)

*Beth immediately panicked. She was worried that her Universal Credit would be stopped if she did not comply. Despite knowing that she did not have childcare in place or many options for childcare, she approached her manager with a request to increase her hours. Unfortunately, her current workplace could not accommodate this request, leaving Beth with no option but to start looking for alternative work.*

*This has been a difficult task for Beth, as she suffers with anxiety and a lack of confidence and is also experiencing difficulties with her oldest son, who has not adjusted well to his new school. The pressure to find a job that will meet her Universal Credit commitments and childcare to support this, as well as supporting her family, is an immense pressure which is greatly impacting her mental health.*

*Beth said,*



*Having to job search for 30-35 hours a week leaves no time for every day-to-day tasks. Life is hard enough as it is as a single parent without the threat of being sanctioned. Look at the cost of living as an example. The threat of sanction feels scary. The thought of being left with no money makes me panic and I worry that this would head to a mental breakdown. I can imagine for some one parent families this could go as far as leading to suicide.*

### **Single mother from Falkirk**

*Beth made a self-referral to OPFS after talking to another mum in the school playground. She is currently receiving support for her mental health and wellbeing, as well as assistance in finding family-friendly, flexible employment to meet Jobcentre requirements.*

## **Beatrix's story**

*Beatrix is 35 years of age and is a single mother of two children. One has recently left school and moved out of home, while her younger daughter is still in primary school. Although Beatrix has completed a college course, she has chosen to seek employment in a field outside her qualification.*

*We have been supporting Beatrix for more than two years. We initially supported her through her college applications, during her time at college, whilst she was looking for work and we are now providing in-work support.*

*Beatrix has had mental health issues for many years. This has been having an impact on her work and study. Prior to being in work, the DWP were in touch with her to make appointments to start job searching. At this time, her mental health was not great, and she was not in the right frame of mind to be searching for a job. Through discussions, we decided with her that she should apply for the Scottish disability payment and investigate being signed off as not fit for work.*

*However, during this time, the job centre was asking Beatrix to apply for work. She received an interview and was successful in getting the job, but her hours were not suitable. Beatrix got in touch with her employer to negotiate hours due to pressure from the job centre. She explained what hours she could manage. Unfortunately, she did not hear anything back from the employer, but instead they advised the DWP that Beatrix had turned down the job. The next she heard from her work coach was that she could be sanctioned as she turned down a position.*

*This experience has had a big impact on Beatrix's mental health, causing a lot of anxiety. We supported her to talk with her work coach again. She was told she had to write up her own account of what happened, giving details of contact and what she had done to try to make the job fit her circumstances. As soon as the work coach mentioned sanctions, it raised her anxieties and left her upset. We ensured a note of this meeting was uploaded to her UC journal.*

*Beatrix's case had to go to a panel of decision makers. The waiting period was incredibly difficult for her, as the uncertainty of whether her benefit would be*

reduced triggered her anxiety. Not long after this, she gained employment in a local shop. Beatrix's mental health can be low at times due to the changes she has had to make, juggling work and family commitments. She has decided to stick with this job due to the fear of what will happen with the job centre. In the end, Beatrix never heard anything back from the job centre regarding the sanction. A written response to confirm that a sanction was not going to be applied would have been helpful and allayed her stress. Overall, Beatrix's mental health has been adversely affected by the threat of sanctions and the pressures of getting into work.

### **Reflections of an OPFS Family Support Worker**

*"We have been working to support parents who have been sanctioned, are under threat of sanctions or who may just be very aware of the possibility. Sanctions are a threat that the DWP can use to have a hold over them. I think some parents just feel pressure to do what they are being told, which might not suit them or be in the best interests of their family.*

*Parents are told they have agreed to certain conditions, but many are unaware of what they've agreed to, as it was discussed at the first meeting or they aren't fully informed about the terms. These can change, and parents might not realise they can ask to change them. If they don't, they can be sanctioned for not meeting these conditions. For example, a parent was wrongfully sanctioned for not attending an information session, even though she did try to explain this wasn't for her. But as this type of work was in her claimant commitment, she was put forward for it. Some parents are also too nervous to explain their views to JCP or say 'I can't do this', so can find themselves with the possibility of sanctions. It is almost like a hold on them.*

*At the moment, one of the parents I am supporting is now in work, but it is not a good position for her, and it is having a negative impact on her mental health. She is frightened by the thought of a sanction if she can't stay at work.*

*It says on the information that if a person leaves a job without good reason, they will be sanctioned, and this can be for 91 days.*

*We have discussed her options. She is going to try to speak to her manager, work coach and GP. She was told before she might be sanctioned for apparently turning down a job, which wasn't true. It was the view of the employer that was put in her account of what happened, and she didn't hear anything back. Not hearing and having to wait on a sanction isn't good.*

*DWP need to be clear and have the same rules for everyone. Work coaches need to be consistent as they are not, and some seem to work in completely different way. Too many inconsistencies."*

Single parents' experiences of the impact of the conditionality regime gives us very serious cause for concern. OPFS advisors and support staff have supported many single parents whose lives have been turned up-side down by the threat of sanctions. For some, the loss of benefits has meant having to visit a foodbank to survive.

We are concerned that, rather than moving towards a society where single parent families can flourish, we are seeing the results of a policy which only serves to exacerbate poverty and inequality and limit the choices and opportunities available to single parents and their children.

It is clear conditionality cannot achieve its aims without leading to greater harms and unforeseen consequences. As the case studies above highlight, the conditionality regime is not beneficial to supporting single parents into sustainable employment or tackling child poverty and social injustice.

## Policy recommendations

Based on our experience working with single parents, as well as evidence from academics and others, we have concluded that, in the long term, the conditionality regime should be abolished and replaced with a system that treats parents and their children with dignity and respect. In the meantime, we must also do all we can to reduce the impact of conditionality and sanctions on single parents by:

- Challenging the UK Government's continued use of conditionality based on evidence.



- Focusing efforts on reducing the impact of conditionality in the short to medium term.
- Developing and promoting positive alternatives to conditionality; approaches which support single parents and children's wellbeing.

## Specific Recommendations

1. Single parent flexibilities. All single parents should be advised, at their first meeting with a job coach, that if they are not able to meet the 30 hours work requirement, they can ask for this to be reduced in their Claimant Commitment. Safeguards should be devised to ensure that lone parents' caring responsibilities are genuinely and consistently taken into account when claimant commitments are developed.
2. Single parent tailored support. The support provided by Jobcentres and providers to single parents should be much more individually tailored and flexibly implemented than it currently is. The reinstatement of specialist lone parent job coaches across Jobcentres would support this agenda.
3. Child impact assessment. A duty should be imposed on work coaches to ensure they have considered the impacts of every claimant commitment requirement on the children in single parent families. A similar duty should be imposed on DWP decision makers to show they have considered the potential impact of a sanction on the child.
4. Reform of the conditionality and sanctions system. A supportive approach, rather than punitive measures, would better assist single parents in overcoming barriers to employment and improving their overall well-being. What is ultimately required is a complete review of the sanctions regime - a shift from a primarily punitive system to one based on support and respect.

## Conclusion

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For many parents, the stress and anxiety caused by the conditionality regime alongside the fear of being sanctioned is resulting in deteriorating health, particularly in terms of mental wellbeing. This is exacerbating existing health inequalities and forcing some parents into claim ill health benefits instead.

In order to thrive, parents, especially children, need an environment which is supportive and nurtures their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. But rather than supporting and encouraging single parents, our experience is that for the majority of single parents and their children, living with conditionality is a profoundly negative and dispiriting experience.

The need for immediate action to support families and prevent long-term damage to the next generation is urgent. Both the Scottish and UK Governments, along with other stakeholders and wider civil society, have a critical role to play. We all share a responsibility to challenge the current conditionality system and work towards a more humane, compassionate and effective approach - one that treats parents and their children with dignity and respect and provides them with real opportunities to thrive.



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

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