

# Why access to further & higher education is important for single parents

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OPFS response to the Scottish Government's call for evidence on the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-2031

## Introduction

This short paper argues that the Scottish Government's 'Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-2031' should include an additional key strategic theme:

**Supporting parents of children in the priority families to gain further and higher education qualifications which enable access to jobs with higher earnings and improved sustainability.**

The delivery plan in its present form is integrated into the DWP 'work first' model which focuses on getting people into work as quickly as possible, through job readiness programmes, training, and support services.<sup>1</sup>

A "work first" approach to tackling child poverty in single parent families is often inappropriate. Many single parents (90% mothers) end up in low-paying, insecure jobs that do not lift their families out of poverty and limit opportunities for long-term career advancement. This paper argues that, without investing in opportunities for single mothers in particular to gain qualifications in further and higher education, a work-first approach can perpetuate in-work poverty.

An approach that includes more investment in opportunities for access to education is essential to effectively tackle child poverty in single parent families.

## Single Parents & Employment - Research & Data

Research on the sectors of the UK economy where single parents work highlights several key findings:

### 1. Employment Rates:

The latest government statistics show nearly 7 in 10 (68.5%) single parents were employed with over half of these employed full-time (51.8%) and under half employed part-time (48.2%). Over 3 in 10 (31.5%) single parent families were not employed (inactive). The employment rate for single mothers was 67.1% compared with single fathers at 80.1%. The employment rate for single mothers is at its highest as the age of the dependent child increases (47.8%, zero to two years compared with 77.7%, 16 to 18 years).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Microsoft Word - Welfare and benefit conditionality report January 2015.docx](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Families and the labour market, UK - Office for National Statistics](#)

## 2. Sectors of Employment:

Single parents are often employed in sectors that offer flexible working hours, but which are low paid . Common sectors include:

- **Retail and Wholesale:** Many single parents work in retail positions such as sales assistants, cashiers, and stock clerks. These roles often offer flexible hours, which can be crucial for managing childcare responsibilities.
- **Health and Social Care:** This sector includes jobs like healthcare assistants, nurses, social workers, and care workers. These roles can provide flexibility in terms of shift patterns and part-time opportunities.
- **Education:** Single parents often find employment in educational institutions as teaching assistants, administrative staff, and support roles. These jobs can align well with school hours, making them suitable for parents with school-aged children.
- **Administrative and Support Services:** Jobs such as office administrators, receptionists, and customer service representatives are common among single parents. These roles can offer regular hours and sometimes the possibility of remote work.
- **Hospitality:** Positions in the hospitality industry, including roles like waitstaff, kitchen assistants, and housekeeping staff, are also popular. These jobs can offer flexible working hours, which can be beneficial for single parents
- **Cleaning and Maintenance:** Many single parents work in cleaning and maintenance roles, which often provide flexible hours and part-time opportunities

These sectors and job types reflect the level of qualifications single parents have and their need for flexibility which can accommodate the unique challenges faced by single parents.

## 3. How do the average salaries for the types of jobs single parents commonly work in compare to the national average?

The average salaries for the jobs commonly held by single parents tend to be very much lower than the national average salary in the UK. Here's a comparison:

### 1. National Average Salary<sup>3</sup>:

The **Median gross annual earnings** for full-time employees is £37,430

### 2. Job-Specific Salaries<sup>4</sup>:

- **Sales Assistants:** Approximately £26,500 per year.
- **Healthcare Assistants:** Around £20,000 to £24,000 per year.
- **Teaching Assistants:** Around £18,000 to £22,000 per year.
- **Office Administrators:** Around £22,000 per year.
- **Waitstaff:** Around £20,000 to £24,000 per year.
- **Cleaners:** Around £ £21,860 per year.

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<sup>3</sup> [Employee earnings in the UK - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Salary in United Kingdom - Average Salary](#)

The salaries for these roles are generally well below the national average. This discrepancy highlights the financial challenges that single parents face, especially when balancing work and childcare responsibilities.

### What are the implications of these salary differences for single parent income ?

The salary differences between the jobs commonly held by single parents and the national average have several significant implications:

1. **Financial Strain:** Single parents often face financial challenges due to lower salaries. This can make it difficult to cover essential living costs, such as housing, food, and childcare. Many single parents struggle to meet a basic standard of living, especially when working full-time on minimum wage.
2. **Poverty Risk:** Lower salaries increase the risk of poverty among single parents. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) reports that **single parents working full-time on minimum wage can only meet 69% of their costs.**<sup>5</sup>
3. **Limited Career Progression:** Jobs with lower salaries often offer limited opportunities for career advancement. Single parents may find themselves in roles that do not fully utilise their skills and qualifications, which can hinder their long-term career growth and earning potential.
4. **Impact on Children:** The financial strain on single parents can have adverse effects on their children. Limited resources can affect children's access to educational opportunities, extracurricular activities, and overall well-being. This can limit future prospects for the children.
5. **Mental and Emotional Stress:** The pressure to balance work and childcare responsibilities while managing financial constraints can lead to increased stress and mental health issues for single parents. This stress can impact their overall quality of life and ability to provide a stable environment for their children.
6. **Need for Policy Support:** These salary differences highlight the need for targeted human capital policy interventions to support single parents.

Addressing these implications requires a comprehensive approach involving social security policies, employer support, further and higher education policy, education institutions and family support initiatives to ensure single parents can achieve financial stability and provide

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<sup>5</sup> [Research shows need for living standards reset - families falling further away from meeting costs | CPAG](#)

a better future for their families. This paper looks specifically at improving access to higher education for single parents/mothers

## Single Parents Educational Qualifications

Single parents generally have lower levels of higher education qualifications compared to all parents. Research highlights the diverse educational backgrounds of single parents and underscores the importance of providing support and opportunities for further education and training. Comparison of the educational qualifications of single parents with all parents in the UK shows 20% of single parents have a degree or higher qualification compared to 42% of all parents : <sup>6</sup>

### Single Parents:

- **Higher Education:** Around 20% have a degree or higher qualification. This is much lower compared to the general population of parents.
- **Further Education:** Approximately 30% have qualifications below degree level, such as A-levels or equivalent.
- **Secondary Education:** A significant percentage, about 40% only have qualifications at the GCSE level or equivalent.
- **No Qualifications:** Around 10% have no formal qualifications.

### All Parents:

- **Higher Education:** Approximately 42% have a degree or higher qualification
- **Further Education:** Around 25% have qualifications below degree level
- **Secondary Education:** About 30% only have qualifications at the GCSE level or equivalent.
- **No Qualifications:** Around 10% have no formal qualifications

This disparity can impact single parent's employment opportunities and earning potential, highlighting the need for targeted support and educational opportunities.

## How does education affect employment rates?

Education significantly impacts employment rates in the UK.<sup>7</sup> Here are some key points:

1. **Higher Employment Rates:** Individuals with higher educational qualifications generally have higher employment rates. For example, people with no qualifications have an employment rate of around 47%, while those with Level 4 qualifications (e.g.,

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<sup>6</sup> [Distribution of parental education - Social Mobility Commission State of the Nation - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>7</sup> [What is the relationship between education and the economy? - North Wales Management School - Wrexham University](#)

Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma, Bachelor's degree) have an employment rate of approximately 87%.

2. **Better Job Opportunities:** Higher education opens up more job opportunities. Many jobs require specific qualifications, and having higher education credentials makes individuals eligible for a broader range of positions.
3. **Higher Earnings:** Education also correlates with higher earnings. Individuals with higher qualifications tend to earn more on average compared to those with lower or no qualifications. This can lead to better financial stability and quality of life.
4. **Reduced Unemployment:** Higher educational attainment is associated with lower unemployment rates. People with higher qualifications are less likely to be unemployed compared to those with lower levels of education.
5. **Skill Development:** Education provides individuals with essential skills and knowledge that are valuable in the job market. This includes both technical skills specific to certain industries and soft skills like communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

These points illustrate the crucial role higher education plays in enhancing employment prospects and overall economic well-being.

### What are the barriers to higher education for single parents?

Research by OPFS, funded by the Robertson Trust, looked at single parents access to higher education as this is a much neglected area. We found single parents face a multitude of barriers to accessing and sustaining higher education, which can impact their ability to improve their qualifications and employment prospects.<sup>8</sup> Key barriers are :

1. **Childcare Responsibilities:** One of the most significant barriers is the need to balance childcare responsibilities with educational commitments. Finding affordable and reliable childcare can be challenging, and many single parents do not have the support network to help with childcare.
2. **Financial Constraints:** Education can be expensive, and lone parents often face financial difficulties. The interaction of the benefits system with student support, combined with being sole carers for their children, can make it difficult to afford further education.
3. **Time Constraints:** Single parents often have limited time due to their dual responsibilities of working and caring for their children. This leaves little time for attending classes, studying, and completing assignments.
4. **Flexible Learning Options:** Many educational programmes are not designed with the needs of single parents in mind. Flexible learning options, such as part-time courses,

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<sup>8</sup> [www.opfs.org.uk](http://www.opfs.org.uk) place holder for RT research report

evening classes, and online learning, have increased. However inflexible curriculum planning can make it difficult for single parents to participate.

5. **Emotional and Mental Health Challenges:** The stress and pressure of managing a household alone can take a toll on single parents' mental health. This can affect their ability to focus on and commit to their studies without single parent tailored support .
6. **Limited Access to Information and Support:** Single parents may not have access to information about available educational opportunities and support services. This can include a lack of awareness about financial aid, bursaries, and programmes designed to help them balance education and parenting.
7. **Discrimination and Stigma:** Single parents may face discrimination and stigma, which can affect their confidence and willingness to pursue further education. This can be particularly challenging in educational environments that do not provide adequate support for their unique needs.

Addressing these barriers requires targeted policies and support systems that consider the specific challenges faced by single parents. This includes providing affordable childcare, financial assistance, flexible learning options, mental health support, and accessible information about educational opportunities.

## Policies to improve Single Parents access to further and higher education

Improving access to further and higher education for single parents involves addressing the barriers they face and implementing supportive policies. Here are some strategies that could help:

1. **Affordable Childcare:** Increasing the availability of affordable, flexible and high-quality childcare is crucial. Subsidies, grants, and free childcare can help single parents manage their childcare responsibilities while pursuing education.
2. **Flexible Learning Options:** Offering flexible learning options such as part-time courses, evening classes, and online learning can make it easier for single parents to balance their studies with their parenting duties.
3. **Financial Support:** Providing financial assistance through scholarships, grants, and bursaries specifically targeted at single parents can help alleviate the financial burden of education.
4. **Support Services:** Establishing support services such as counselling, mentoring, and academic advising tailored to the needs of single parents can help them navigate the challenges of higher education.
5. **Employability :** Encouraging employability services to support single parents into higher education by including this as an outcome in contracts .
6. **Community Services :** Resourcing community services such as libraries that provide educational resources, childcare support, and peer networks can create a supportive environment for lone parents pursuing education.

7. **Awareness Campaigns:** Raising awareness about the educational opportunities and support available to single parents can help them access the resources they need. This includes information on financial support, childcare options, and flexible learning programmes.
8. **Policy Advocacy:** Advocating for policies that support single parents in education, such as increased funding for childcare, flexible learning options, and targeted financial aid, to drive systemic change.

We think the above evidence justifies adding a new theme to the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-203 - **'Supporting parents of children in the priority families to gain further and higher education qualifications which enable access to jobs with higher earnings and improved sustainability'**

This would ensure Scottish Government implement policies and allocate resources to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for single parents. Helping them achieve their academic and career goals would also contribute to reducing single parent family poverty.

These policies, if effectively implemented, would create a more supportive environment for single parents, helping them to gain higher education qualifications, achieve financial stability and improve their quality of life for themselves and their children.

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