



# One Parent Families –The Issues

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Strategy to tackle the barriers facing lone parents and their children is a cross cutting issue that is dispersed across several policy areas, such as education, skills, health, social security, employment, social work and housing, and spans both devolved and reserved policy areas of the Scottish and UK Governments.

The economic position of families strongly affects the present and future welfare of children. Whether a family is able to meet the material needs of children depends more on whether it has income from work than directly on whether there are two parents. However, the much greater amount of time that lone parents spend out of paid work means that they are more often caught in a "Hardship Trap".<sup>1</sup> Today's high level of child poverty is likely to have continuing negative effects on families as the present generation grows up. Equally, any measures that successfully address child poverty, especially by giving more households access to well paid family friendly employment, are likely to have wide-ranging effects in the years ahead, that go beyond the improvement of the immediate welfare of children living in poverty.

OPFS consulted 100 lone parents in 2008 to feed into the Scottish Governments anti poverty strategy "**Achieving Our Potential: A Framework to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland**"<sup>2</sup>. The issue which lone parents felt was at the centre of the challenges faced by anyone bringing up a child on their own is that **they have sole responsibility for the combined roles of breadwinner and main carer.**

## Pressures lone parents face

- Stress
- Social isolation
- Negative attitudes in society
- Low personal expectations
- Stereotyping
- Financial difficulties
- Poverty and Debt
- Economically disadvantaged by high fuel costs
- Barriers to accessing/continuing education and training
- Limited access to relevant training opportunities
- Challenges with childcare provision - high cost, access and flexibility
- Poor health
- Complexity of Benefit and Tax Credit Systems

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<sup>1</sup> Making Work Pay: Lone mothers, employment and well-being; Bryson, Ford and White ;JosephRowntree Foundation <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/sp129.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/246055/0069426.pdf>

## Poverty: Causes and Symptoms

What are lone parent's views on poverty? Feedback from lone parents indicates quite clearly that poverty very often has a woman's face. Many of the lone parents OPFS has consulted talked about the stigma they still feel about living in poverty – particularly how they were treated by key public services

### Causes or Symptoms?

Much of the feedback highlighted that many lone parent felt trapped in poverty and that the causes were of a multiple nature. However what is clear, from the parents bringing up children on their own that we consulted, is that **their lone parent status, and the fact that 92% are women, is the key cause of the poverty they face – lone parents need both to work more hours for the same income as two working parents and spend more time with their children where the other parent is absent.** Women's inequality and the disadvantages they face in the workplace were felt to be important in creating **risk factors** which make them vulnerable to poverty **triggered by certain life events or transitions – separation; divorce; pregnancy; ill health; into /out of employment.**

The consultations reinforced the view that there are many complex factors that impinge on an individual Lone Parents situation including:

- The high level of disadvantage amongst those lone parents living on Income Support (debt, low skills, isolation, poor health and low confidence)
- High and increasing housing and childcare costs.
- Low pay-high turnover economy with flexible hours demanded in many jobs
- Work-family balance issues- much family leave is unpaid, so not accessible to lone parents.
- The majority of lone parents live in communities suffering deprivation as defined by the Scottish Government indicators.

## Barriers

Lone Parents told us they faced a range of barriers. These tend to have a cumulative impact, with many lone parents facing three or more of these barriers as reasons for not being able to take up paid work. The issues raised could be categorised into three different areas. An individual Lone Parents situation very much depends on issues around: **personal attributes; personal circumstances and structural influences.**<sup>3</sup>

**1. Personal Attributes** (lone parent status; self-esteem, confidence, essential, key and vocational skills levels, work experience)

Personal attributes, i.e. the possession of skills and personal qualities such as motivation and flexibility have long been seen as key to escaping poverty. Essential skills, key skills and vocational skills levels are critical areas for improvement, especially literacy and numeracy. Research shows Lone Parents tend to have fewer skills and educational qualifications and many lone parents experience emotional barriers. Some parents said it was a challenge to reconcile a caring role in the absence of a partner with paid employment and are reluctant to leave their children. Some lone parents involved in the consultation had entered lone parenthood after fleeing disruptive or even violent relationships that have had an impact on self-esteem, self-belief and self-worth. Confidence is also affected by lack of up to date work skills or experience and a lack of suitable

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/57346/0016699.pdf>

qualifications. Working lone parents told us how work was often difficult and stressful, and left them feeling that they had insufficient quality time with their children. And many lone parents who contacted us during the course of this consultation commented that they felt that they were receiving mixed messages about the relative importance of work and parenting and felt caught in the middle between the competing demands of Westminster (as potential workers) & Holyrood (as "responsible" parents).

## **2. Personal Circumstances:** (access to transport, access to childcare, caring responsibilities, health, isolation, benefits trap, debt, poverty, attitudes)

Many lone parents expressed the fear that in-work costs meant they would be financially worse off in work. In order to work, lone parents must balance variable elements of income such as wages, tax credits, in-work benefits, any maintenance received and housing benefit as well as the costs of travel, lunches, school meals and existing debts.

Attitudes: Employers' perceptions or prejudices (e.g. concern about unpredictable demands on lone parents) and recruitment practices were identified as a key barrier. The attitudes of support workers (institutional) or family were often identified as reinforcing low expectations which may lead to low levels of support or inappropriate support.

Transitions: Navigating transitions from benefit to work can form serious barriers to Lone Parents moving into and staying in employment. The challenges of resolving financial matters can often feel insurmountable such as: outstanding debts; potential disposable income when in work; having childcare in place at the right time, at a cost which is affordable.

Debt is a serious issue for many lone parents. It was felt that it was unfair of lending agencies to target people in poorer areas particularly 'doorstep lenders'. Door-step lenders often charge 85% interest. The aggressive pursuit of historic debts such as Council Tax, & Water Rates arrears, when someone comes off Income Support, increases in-work costs and affect sustainable employment.

## **3. Structural Influences:** (Availability of employment opportunities near to where Lone Parents live/ government interventions; childcare infrastructure)

The Benefits system and its inflexibility- is a key barrier for Lone Parents.<sup>4</sup> The "poverty trap" caused by the interaction of the tax and benefit systems affected many Lone Parents involved in OPFS focus groups. Participants expressed the view, with passion, that to tackle poverty, welfare benefits must be adequate for both children and adults.

Employment – where employment is located, in-work costs (housing, childcare, school meals) – are key issues for lone parents. A key barrier relates to the nature of the local labour market itself and the opportunities available for employment within the area which a parent is able to travel to. An overall shortage of jobs in the labour market can be the biggest barrier and there where local shortages create unemployment or economic inactivity. The majority of Lone parents who participated in the consultations lived in areas where there is a shortage of jobs.

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Childcare- Childcare is one of the largest barriers facing lone parents considering entering the labour market.<sup>5</sup> Many of the lone parents reported not being able to find childcare when they wanted it. Many reported that it was for work-related reasons that they wanted childcare.

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<sup>4</sup> Lone parents and the challenges of working; Citizens Advice(Eng)  
[http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/campaigns/policy\\_campaign\\_publications/evidence\\_reports/er\\_benefitsandtaxcredits/barriers\\_to\\_work.htm](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/campaigns/policy_campaign_publications/evidence_reports/er_benefitsandtaxcredits/barriers_to_work.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Extended Schools Childcare Pilot; York Consulting ;Scottish Govt 2006  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/11/17135806/6>

Shortages are particularly acute in areas with high levels of poverty. Childcare to meet the needs of unsocial hours was scarce if not unobtainable.

Fuel – Many lone parents were faced with high fuel costs. The infrastructure for the provision of fuel to low income families was felt to be seriously flawed.

Personal Finance -It was clear from the experiences of the lone parents who told us about their personal experience that Financial Institutions are not in tune with the government's strategy to eradicate child poverty and increase employment for Lone Parents to 70%.

## Conclusion

Poverty affects the lives of many lone parents and limits the life choices of their children. Tackling this requires both resources and commitment. There is a growing recognition by policy makers that lone parents face significant barriers in escaping the poverty trap. While many combine paid and unpaid work, the alternative of concentrating on the unpaid work of caring for children and others should be a viable and valued option. Any vision for the future should provide genuine choice to parents as to whether to stay at home with their children or take up employment with the guarantee of affordable, high quality, accessible childcare.

Lone parents are a key group and central to strategies that aim to achieve success in reaching child poverty and employment targets. Innovations that can fit with the everyday reality and priorities of lone parents' lives are vital. Lone parents are twice as likely to 'cycle' between work and welfare and therefore the issue of sustainable employment and aftercare are crucial. This brings to light the complex issue of the interaction between 'caring work' and paid employment and "time poverty" and "income poverty".

Understanding better how to enable this crucial interaction is key to achieving the child poverty target and enabling lone parents into sustainable employment. A move towards an individual worker /carer model has the potential to more effectively address the barriers to employment of many lone parents. OPFS is committed to working with others to develop positive policies that address the issues faced by lone parents. We share the views expressed in the Harker Report<sup>6</sup> that

*"The work first approach is not sufficient to end child poverty" and that "a system which encourages parents to take any job rather than one that offers them good long term prospects, or leads to parents "cycling" between having a job and being out of work is neither efficient nor effective in tackling child poverty."*

### Contact for Further Information

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Delivering on Child Poverty: what would it take?" Lisa Harker.DWP Cm 6951  
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/harker-full.pdf>