



Single Parent Families Impact Report

Issue 31

Spotlight: Benefit Conditionality
March 2025

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Introduction

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.

Key issues

The key issues 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 topic

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

Main themes

We are continuing to actively collect data and qualitative insights from single parents through our national and local services to inform and shape 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:** increased work requirements and the threat of sanctions for parents receiving Universal Credit are contributing to significant financial hardship and psychological distress.

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

1. Financial concerns and poverty.

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"*.¹ Consequently, reducing child poverty is not just a social good, it's an economic necessity.

2. Sole carer and provider responsibilities

Insights from our five local services reveal that the day-to-day realities of being both sole carer and provider are deeply challenging for single parents. Many are facing significant emotional and practical pressures as they adjust to their new circumstances, including:

- Becoming a parent for the first time without adequate support, and feeling overwhelmed by the uncertainty of what to expect or where to turn for help
- Balancing the demands of caring for children with the difficulty of finding and sustaining paid employment



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.



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

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



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 carry the primary responsibility for their children's well-being, yet they continue to face significant barriers to providing for their families. The reality is stark: one in three children living in poverty are living in a single parent household.² To address this injustice, we must continue to campaign for the rights and needs of single mothers. Tackling the structural inequalities that constrain women's incomes and limit access to services that meet their needs is not only necessary, but also urgent.

3. Domestic abuse

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 often tell us that economic abuse is a major barrier to leaving an abusive relationship. Some parents have shared with OPFS support workers that they would have left sooner but were unable to afford it. In many cases, their former partner controlled the household finances, refusing to contribute fairly or taking money outright and leaving them with little or no financial independence.

² Ibid 2025

Domestic abuse, including coercive control, has a profound impact on mothers, undermining their physical and 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

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living.³ 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:

³ [131.-CRC-poster-A2-1pp-AW.pdf](#)

Non-payment issues: many of the single parents, predominantly mothers, have reported that their child's other parent is not paying their full child maintenance, placing significant financial strain on the family.

Complexity and accessibility: parents calling our Lone Parent Helpline describe the child maintenance system as a maze, making it difficult for them to understand 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 report high levels of payment arrears, which contribute 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 challenges underscore the urgent need for significant reforms to better support families and 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



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 in order to receive welfare benefits. Failure to meet these requirements can result in sanctions, such as reduced or suspended benefits. For single parents, who already juggling the demanding roles of both sole carer and breadwinner, this system adds further strain by forcing them to meet work requirements, regardless of their personal circumstances.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) statistics for 2024 offer a comprehensive snapshot of single parent UC claimants who are subject to conditionality.⁴

1. Total single parent claimants: around 1.2 million single parents were receiving UC.
2. Conditionality regimes:
 - **Searching for work:** around 45% of single parent claimants were required to actively search for work.

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

- **Working with requirements:** about 30% were subject to work-related requirements, including training and work preparation.
- **No work requirements:** the remaining 25% were exempt from work requirements due to various reasons such as caring responsibilities or health conditions.

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.⁵

The impact of benefit conditionality on the financial stability and overall wellbeing of single-parent families is a significant concern. OPFS is currently undertaking research to explore the impact of conditionality 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 that highlight parents' experiences of conditionality and its impact on them and on their families. The first two accounts share the perspectives of parents, while the third offers insights from an OPFS family support worker.

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

Beth's story: a single mother from Falkirk

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 secure a regular 10am to 2pm shift, four days a week. This schedule allows her to drop off and pick up both children without the need for childcare, while continuing to receive UC.

As part of her conditionality obligations, Beth was called in for a 'work commitments' review at the Jobcentre last September. She was told during this meeting that she would be expected to increase her working hours to 30 per week, as 16 hours was no longer considered sufficient.

Beth immediately panicked. She was worried that her UC would be stopped if she did not comply. Although she knew she did not have any childcare in place and had limited options available, 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 situation has been particularly challenging for Beth, as she struggles with anxiety and low confidence. On top of that, her oldest son is having struggling to settle into his new school, which is adding to her stress. The pressure to secure a job that meets UC requirements, while also finding suitable childcare, all while trying to support her family, is overwhelming and is taking a significant toll on 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.

How OPFS has supported Beth:

Beth reached out to OPFS after talking to another mum in the school playground. She is currently receiving support for her mental health and wellbeing, along with help finding family-friendly, flexible employment to meet Jobcentre requirements.

Beatrix's story, as told by an OPFS Family Support Worker:

Beatrix is 35-year-old single mother with two children. Her eldest has recently left school and moved out, 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 unrelated to 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, which have significantly affected her work and studies. Before she secured work, the DWP were in touch with her to make appointments to start job searching. At that time, her mental health was fragile, and she didn't feel ready to begin job searching. After some discussions, we agreed that she should apply for Adult Disability Payment and investigate being signed off as unfit for work.

During this period, the Jobcentre was pressuring Beatrix to apply for work. She was offered an interview and was successful in getting the job, but the hours were not suitable. Beatrix got in touch with her employer to negotiate hours due to pressure from the Jobcentre. She explained what hours she could work, but unfortunately, she never received a response. Instead, the employer advised the DWP that Beatrix had turned down the job. The next she heard from her work coach was a warning that she could face sanctions for turning the position down.

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 a detailed account of what happened, including the steps she had taken to make the job fit her circumstances. When the work coach mentioned the possibility of sanctions, it caused a lot of anxiety for Beatrix, leaving her feeling upset. To ensure everything was documented, we made sure a note of the meeting was uploaded to her UC journal.

Beatrix's case had to go to a panel of decision makers. The waiting period and uncertainty was incredibly difficult for her. Not long after, she found a job in a local shop.

Beatrix's mental health can fluctuate, especially as she juggles work and family commitments. Out of fear of further repercussions from the Jobcentre, she has decided to stay in the job, despite the challenges. Ultimately, Beatrix never received any communication from the Jobcentre regarding the potential sanction. A written confirmation that no sanction would be applied would have been incredibly helpful in easing her stress. Overall, the looming threat of sanctions and the pressure to secure employment have had a significant negative impact on her mental health.

Reflections from the OPFS Family Support Worker

"We have been providing support to parents who have been sanctioned, are under threat of sanctions or who may just be very aware of the possibility. Sanctions serve as a tool 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 their needs 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 with the conditionality regime raise serious concerns. OPFS advisors have supported many parents whose lives have been disrupted by the threat of sanctions, with some even having to rely on foodbanks to survive after losing benefits.

We are concerned that, instead of fostering a society where single parents can thrive, current policies are exacerbating poverty and inequality, restricting the choices and opportunities available to both single parents and their children.

It is clear conditionality is failing to achieve its intending goals and is instead leading to great harms and unintended consequences. As the case studies show, the conditionality regime not only fails to support single parents into sustainable employment, but it also fails to address child poverty or combat social injustice.

Policy recommendations

Based on our extensive experience working with single parents, along with evidence from academics and other experts, we believe 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 take urgent action to mitigate the harmful impact of conditionality and sanctions on single parents by:

- Challenging the UK Government's ongoing use of conditionality, backed by evidence.
- Prioritising efforts to reduce the short- to medium term impact of impact of conditionality.
- Developing and promoting positive alternatives to conditionality; approaches which support the wellbeing of single parents and their children.

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

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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