



**OPFS submission to
Local Government and Communities Committee
Inquiry into Child Poverty.**

September 2008



Contents

1. Introduction
2. One Parent Families Scotland
3. Causes and Symptoms
4. Policies and Services
5. Priorities for Action: Prevention, Reduction and Alleviation of Poverty
6. Conclusion

Choices: Giving Lone Parents a Voice
100 Wellington Street, Glasgow, G2 6DH
Tel: 0141 847 0444
mariondavis@opfswest.org.uk



1. Introduction

This submission presents evidence from OPFS to feed into the Local Government and Communities Committee' Inquiry into Child Poverty. The contents are drawn out of feedback from lone parents attending various focus group events and a major conference held in Glasgow on the 28th June 2008. In all this involved over 60 lone parents. The key points from this submission are summed up here.

Strategy to tackle poverty is a cross cutting issue that is dispersed across several policy areas and spans both devolved and reserved policy areas of the Scottish and UK Governments. This report covers both areas as they are inextricably linked.

A family's access to resources is principally reliant on their earned income and/or state benefits. These are to a great extent affected by Westminster macro-policies in relation to the economy, employment and income redistribution. Increasing employment opportunities for lone parents outside the labour market is a key plank of this approach.

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".

Moreover the key issue for anyone bringing up a child on their own is that they have sole responsibility for the combined roles of breadwinner and main carer. 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.

2. One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS)

OPFS is Scotland's national independent lone parent organisation which employs over 200 people and delivers quality services to Lone Parents and others facing disadvantage. The organisation now has project offices in seven areas of Scotland, and has an annual turnover exceeding £2 million and reaches over 10,000 parents and children.

2.1 Vision

All families in Scotland are equally valued and empowered with choices and opportunities to participate fully in all areas of life.

2.2 Mission

To provide lone parent and other families with information, support, flexible childcare and training, by working in partnership to deliver effective services to families.

2.3 Core Activities Delivered

- Policy , Research and Advocacy work
- Information and Advice Services and the National Lone Parent Advice Line
- Family Support Services
- Flexible Childcare Services :Childcare @ Home, Mobile Crèches and transport services
- Training for lone parents and for community agencies
- Lone Parent Engagement and employability work

3. Poverty: Causes and Symptoms



Poverty in One Parent Families in Scotland

What are lone parent's views on poverty? Have things changed? What causes lone parent poverty? Which services/policies work well, where could things be better and where are the gaps? What are the priorities – prevention, reduction or alleviation?

Feedback from lone parents indicates quite clearly that poverty very often has a woman's face. Many of the lone parents 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.

Specific 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.**

Personal Attributes:

Essential skills, key skills and vocational skills levels are critical areas for improvement, especially literacy and numeracy. However Lone Parents tend to have fewer skills and educational qualifications. Often 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 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 crossfire between Westminster & Holyrood policies:



Personal Circumstances:

In –work Costs. 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.

Childcare is a one of the largest barriers facing lone parents considering entering the labour market. 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. Shortages are particularly acute in areas with high levels of poverty. Childcare to meet the needs of unsocial hours was scarce if not unobtainable.

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.

Structural Influences:

The Benefits system and its inflexibility is a key barrier for Lone Parents. The “poverty trap” caused by the interaction of the tax and benefit systems affected many Lone Parents involved in the 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. The majority of Lone parents who participated in the consultations lived in areas where there is a shortage of jobs. Navigating transitions from benefit to work can form serious barriers to Lone Parents moving into and staying in employment.

Childcare- the lone parents interviewed faced a range of barriers to getting and staying in work, with many individuals reporting multiple factors that had caused them to fall out of employment. Unsurprisingly childcare was cited as a key issue affecting many of the lone parents' labour market experiences and opportunities.

Fuel – Many women at the conference organised in partnership with Scottish Women's Convention 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%.

4. Policies and Services

What Works well?

Working for Families

This initiative delivered in selected local authorities received unanimous acclaim for participants in all focus group discussions. Lone Parents said they favoured this personalised approach.

Community Projects

Many of the parents consulted stated that they valued local independent projects. These services were easy to access and they were felt to be based on local need.

Schools

Schools were identified as in some ways having improved for pupils. In relation to this some schools now run breakfast clubs which was seen as positive change in helping children improve their health particularly in relation to diet. School meals were felt to have improved esp. in pilot areas .

Improvements Needed?



Housing

Most lone parents across all consultations identified the provision of housing for lone parents and the quality of that housing as greatly needing improvement. Higher rent levels in flats with concierge services and also high rent levels associated with greater use of private sector rented property are both factors deepening the poverty trap.

Employment

Employment was major concern. The stigma of being a lone parent and going for a job was an ongoing problem. It was suggested improvements were needed in the type of employment available. Jobs – should be flexible and genuinely family-friendly.

Child Support

The participants reported a number of difficulties with the CSA in terms of properly calculating maintenance. This was viewed as a barrier to employment for some. If maintenance was properly calculated and available this would act as an incentive for lone parents to work.

Moving into Work & In-Work Income

Additional costs once in work were factors such as having to pay for full council tax and 20% or more of childcare costs. Other problems came in additional expenses such as losing free school meals. It was felt that there should be recognition of this by policy makers.

Rural Areas

Lone parents in rural areas face many of the problems common to lone parents generally, such as poverty, social isolation and lack of respite from childcare, plus additional problems of geographical isolation, more hostile social attitudes, and especially lack of access to transport.

Gaps in Services ?

Employability Pathway

Many lone parents felt more specialist support on the journey toward paid work was needed – recruitment methods should be varied; volunteering has a role to play; the key worker model was seen as crucial, and especially effective when a relationship develops over a period of time, and when they are part of a wider network linking a range of services; and there was a concern about job outcome targets working against the client-centred approach.

Childcare/ Pre-teenager Provision

Some participants had retrained for employment through education and were unable to attain a job due to factors such as the cost of childcare. Parents pointed out that half day places are not childcare but part of education provision. There was concern that there was not enough provision for children 11 years and above – particularly if lone parents are expected to move into employment. It was felt that there was a huge gap in flexible childcare, for example in the home, for parents working unsocial hours. Children with additional support needs also often require 1:1 care in their own home.

Debt & Money Advice

It was felt by many parents that things had got more difficult recently. There has been a rise in the number of companies trying to give credit - this was a concern in that it leads to debt.

Stress & Mental Health

Stress was also recognised as being a fact of life for parents living on Income Support with one participant pointing out stress was relative to individual's situations.

In terms of stress and depression a lack of support was highlighted as a concern for many lone parents - with many of the group citing personal experiences for this area. It was felt that mental health services were short in supply.

5. Priorities for Action: Prevention, Reduction and Alleviation of Poverty

The wide ranging consultation carried out by OPFS with 68 lone parents has highlighted some key issues as pre-requisites to tackling one parent family poverty and exclusion. Many parents felt that at the core of the matter was the question "*What kind of society do we want to live in- the extremes of wealth and poverty do not seem just in a country as wealthy as Scotland*" The general consensus was that prevention is much more effective than resolving problems after they had arisen. Helping children



to have the “best start in life “was felt to be very important. However, improving an individual’s capacity to avoid poverty –whether adult or child – was felt to be only part of the solution.

Prevention of Poverty in One Parent Families & Tackling its Causes

Choice to be a full-time Parent

There are parents bringing up children on their own who should be able to choose not to take up employment because it’s not in their child’s best interests. It was felt that the adult components of Income Support and Jobseeker’s Allowance need to be increased significantly as a matter of urgency to improve the income of Scotland’s poorest families.

Childcare

There was a call from the majority of parents for universal, flexible free childcare- particularly for parents working unsocial hours and for such care to receive subsidy since it is expensive to provide.

Support into Work

Many lone parents wanted to take up paid work, part-time preferably to leave time for their parenting role. However a quarter of people, including children, in part-time working lone parent families are living in poverty. It was felt that lone parents need constructive help to move into work, not more threats of losing their benefit. Rather than a punitive 'work for benefit ' regime, more help is needed to enable lone parents overcome the challenges they face including:

Participation & Consultation

It was felt as a whole by the groups that more consultation was the way forward to improving lives for communities and that these consultations should ask the people living in those areas which needed regeneration. However it was argued that there are empty consultations which take place and then things go ahead as planned regardless of community’s viewpoints.

Tackling the barriers trapping lone parents in poverty

Improving Employment Prospects

Lone Parents, who make the decision that the time is right to move on, progress through different stages. While each period differs depending on the individual’s background and circumstances, there are three stages of intervention that are particularly relevant to Lone Parent Employability:

- **Pre-Employment:** support to build confidence and self-esteem, raise aspirations and forward plan
- **New Deal Ready:** information and guidance, referral to services and training/education; volunteering; job search assistance;
- **Post New Deal for Lone Parents:** in-work support to managing personal and job pressures encourage continued career progression, increase job retention.

The response to lone parent poverty and resulting initiatives will be more successful if they take account of these work readiness criteria.

Employment & Skills

A wide range of new measures have been announced for lone parents around employment and skills policy, most significantly the change from Income Support to Jobseeker’s Allowance for lone parents whose youngest child is aged seven. Lone Parents consulted strongly opposed this change, most felt it to be overly punitive and unlikely to achieve the desired effect of helping more lone parents to access employment. However, many lone parents’ still had their own ambitions to participate in paid work, and believed that greater integration of advice on employment and support with improving skills would be vital to achieving this goal.

Housing

A key issue for Lone Parents is their housing and how it affects the quality of life of their children. The communities identified by the Scottish Government as suffering multiple deprivation are the same communities where many one parent families live – often over 50% of families with dependent children. Therefore the creation of sustainable, poverty- free communities must include a comprehensive package of initiatives, including affordable quality housing, to meet the needs of one-parent families.



One Parent Proofing

It's no easy task becoming a working lone parent. A One Parent Proofing Toolkit developed by UK lone parent agencies, in partnership with lone parents themselves, aims to encourage agencies to respond to the challenges facing lone parents by suggesting One Parent Proofed solutions. It provides a framework for organisations to develop an Action Plan to set and monitor targets to evaluate the impact of their work on lone parents. **One parent proofing can be applied to policy for all families and if implemented help meet the needs and aspirations of all parents balancing employment with childcare.**

Reducing the Impact of Poverty

There was resounding support given to the policy of more children having access to free healthy school meals and the introduction of free prescriptions. Some parents argued that the Scottish Government should adopt a more holistic approach to understanding the causes of and protection against poverty so that it could support a broader approach to economic wellbeing.

- Family support services should be available to parents when they need it.
- Better access to financial capability information and money advice
- Greater access to affordable credit for those on low incomes.
- Take account for the different ways that life events impact on women and men. Stronger protection is needed for women who are at particular risk of falling into poverty during relationship breakdowns, when escaping domestic violence, and when they become mothers.
- The risk of poverty to large families could be reduced by extending Childcare Tax Credit to third and subsequent children, and increasing the Child Benefit rate for second and subsequent children to that for the first child.
- The impact of poverty can be reduced by access to high quality information, advice and support services.
- Local authorities should invest in incorporating capacity building for lone parents into local projects and that there was great strength in peer to peer learning and mentoring.

6. Conclusion

OPFS supports the idea of having a set of principles with which to measure both national & local government's achievements towards eradicating child poverty. Lone Parents involved in our consultations felt it was important to point out some key areas which do not always have the profile required in the discussions around poverty:

- Paid work can be a key route out of poverty but not always!
- Value women's unpaid contribution to the economy through their caring role
- There is a lack of reference to employers and the private sector
- Poverty is about more than income – the issue of wellbeing is of wider significance.
- An individual's capacity to escape poverty must be balance with attention to structural deficiencies.
- Monitoring the impact of employability on child poverty is a key element.

Poverty affects the lives of many lone parents and limits the life choices of their children. While many combine paid and unpaid work, the alternative of specialising in 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 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. We share the views expressed in the Lisa Harker Report 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.”*
