

Freeing low-income single parents from in-work poverty's grip

For too many single parents in Scotland the labour market is not working. Children from single-parent households make up 40% of all children in poverty in Scotland. In the last 10 years there has also been a pronounced increase in the number of children who are part of in-work single-parent households. This research was conducted to learn more about the experiences of low- or no-income single parents entering, staying in and progressing in, the Scottish labour market and to develop solutions with them. It concludes that we must transform the support provided for single parents to get into and progress in work if we are to meet our child poverty targets.

Jack Evans, Policy and Partnerships Manager (Work), Scotland

Actions

- Investment in specific support for single parents in the labour market.
- Work with employers to create workplace cultures that understand, value and respect single parents' experience and contribution.
- Transform and expand eligibility of childcare that allows single parents to access and progress within the labour market.

The research

Was carried out by Talat Yaqoob and Iffat Shahnaz as part of The Collective, working with One Parent Families Scotland.

JUNE 2021

Background

This research makes recommendations about how Scottish Government and employers can ensure work can play a role in releasing single parents from poverty's grip. Ensuring that single parents can thrive within the labour market will play a significant role in ensuring children can grow up with the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and where their parents are not held back by the severe limitations of living in poverty. Without action that supports this group, reaching the statutory targets set by Scottish Parliament to significantly reduce child poverty by 2030 will be extremely difficult.

The research and recommendations were coproduced with single parents and draw on surveys, focus groups and interviews with parents in low-paid work, people who had recently left or lost work, and people who were proactively seeking work.

Key points

Before coronavirus, an unacceptable 14.5 million people in the UK were caught up in poverty, equating to more than one in five people. Child poverty and in-work poverty had been on the rise for several years and some groups were disproportionately likely to be pulled into poverty. Many of those groups already struggling most to stay afloat have also borne the brunt of the economic and health impacts of COVID-19. These include:

- Of the 230,000 children in poverty in Scotland, 90,000 live in single-parent households.
- Working with this group is vital if we are to reach the Scottish Child Poverty targets by 2030, and to prevent more children growing up in hardship.
- COVID-19 has exacerbated the injustices already felt by low-income single parents. The sectors where many single parents (predominantly women) are employed have been hardest hit.
- Single parents are often trapped in poverty by a combination of factors; the escalating cost of childcare, increasing costs of living (particularly housing), a lack of quality flexible and part-time job roles, and a security system which is not fit for purpose as regards their lives.
- Many of the issues highlighted here are not new, indeed they are structural issues that single parents have been raising for years. They are growing frustrated that while their voices are being heard, their experience is not changing.

Findings

The research highlights nine areas that defined single parents' experiences in the labour market. These were often related to restriction of opportunity, barriers to their progression and employment, and poor experiences with employers and line managers. The research offers eleven wide-ranging recommendations that match up with the parents' experience in work and seeking work.

A combination of the research with parents and the review of current support of interventions for single parents in the labour market told a story of urgency and opportunity. These parents need the support of the Government and employers now, and the following are areas that featured throughout the research as priorities.

Workplace culture

“They don’t understand, they will say, ‘well I’ve got kids and I work’ but what they don’t realise is they might have support, they might have family that can help, I don’t have that.”

The research highlighted a pattern of undervaluation, stigma and even discrimination faced by single parents in the workplace. Parents felt there was a lack of understanding from their employers about what life was like for a single parent on low income. This also translated into less flexible working arrangements that parents reported as contributing to their struggle to progress.

The need for flexible working for single parents is clear and without it, parents in the research describe experiencing fear of losing out on hours and progression opportunities. Parents feared the reaction they would get when requesting time off for caring responsibilities. Fear was also reported by single parents with disabled children. Three single parents stated that they either did not feel able to share their child’s needs with their employer, or felt discriminated against when they did share their child’s needs and asked for additional flexibility.

There were positive experiences highlighted by parents and while these were in the minority, the common theme for what made a ‘good employer’ was compassion and flexibility. In practice this meant line managers communicating well, giving good notice of shifts, and setting fair expectations. When employers acted this way, the parents felt increased loyalty and enthusiasm towards their work. It would be beneficial to employers and workers if this behaviour were seen as an example to replicate across the labour market.

Employability

“My big fear in being involved in these things is the discrimination you feel being a single parent.”

The research spoke to seventeen parents who had experience of employability programmes. Their experience was of programmes not designed with them in mind, and particularly they did not understand the complex barriers that may prevent them taking part in the labour market. For such programmes to be effective they must be designed with, and for, single parents.

The parents’ experience was supported by the findings in the review of existing labour market interventions for single parents. For example, while there are several back-to-work programmes, they do not have specialist support for single parents and often focus on young people and assume no caring responsibility.

Furthermore, there are several well-intentioned employability schemes highlighted in the report, yet parents were not accessing them. This could be explained by a lack of coherence between national policy and local authority implementation, programmes conflicting with each other, and eligibility criteria stopping support reaching those it is designed to help.

Childcare

“Childcare that covers the times you are going to be working or training. It’s no use if nursery finishes at 3pm and your job finishes at 4pm. Making this easier for parents, as I wouldn’t have anyone else to collect him.”

Childcare was the central issue raised by every parent involved in this research and is intrinsically linked to what jobs are available to single parents and when. The cost of childcare can make entering the labour market unattractive, and the lack of flexibility of the care can make it impractical. Parents reported costs of up £600 a month, and a childcare system that follows a rigid hours-based approach that assumes a 9am to 5pm working pattern.

Availability and 'wrap-around' care were also highlighted as issues alongside cost. Furthermore, rigidity around age in accessing childcare (starting, for some, from two years old) makes the labour market inaccessible for up to two years or more for many single parents.

The parents involved in this research stressed their frustration at how often they have called for transformation in childcare, and have not seen it delivered.

Conclusion

Findings from this research show us that for many single parents in Scotland the labour market is not working. The lived experience of single parents is that support to access the labour market is not working for them, and the attempts to remove barriers to the labour market are currently insufficient. This is confirmation of what single parents and organisations that support them have been saying for some time, and is supported by the data that shows a continuing rise in in-work poverty for single parents over the last 10 years.

Without addressing the issues raised in this research, single parents are likely to remain trapped in poverty and Scotland is unlikely to be able to reach its child poverty targets in 2030. This would be both a missed opportunity and a huge waste of the potential of a significant proportion of the population.

Despite the scale of the challenge to ensure that we create a labour market that works for single parents, there should be optimism that we can meet this challenge. There is a policy landscape in Scotland that values lived experience, and many of the aspects of policy that could create systemic change for single parents are ones Scottish Government controls. The experience of single parents is embedded in employability and childcare policy. Parents tell us that employer behaviour has a significant impact on their experience of work, we can work with employers and single parents to create a common understanding of experience and deliver new workplace cultures. Finally, the ambitious twin targets of Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament that aspire to Scotland becoming a Fair Work Nation by 2025, and reducing Child Poverty to 10% by 2030, can be seen as deeply connected for single parents. Legitimately reaching both goals will only be achievable if they include dedicated strategies for single parents.

About the project

The research for this project was conducted by consultants Iffat Shahnaz and Talat Yaqoob as part of The Collective working with One Parent Families Scotland. It was coproduced with single parents between March and June 2021. It included a research survey with forty parents as well as interviews and focus groups with twenty-six single parents across six local authority areas.

We would like to thank all the single parents who gave us their time, shared their experiences with us and coproduced the recommendations.

Thank you also to One Parent Families Scotland and Fife Gingerbread staff for their insights and support in coordinating interviews and focus groups.

For further information

The full report, **Freeing low-income single parents from in-work poverty's grip**, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free PDF at www.jrf.org.uk

Read more summaries at www.jrf.org.uk
Other formats available
ISBN 978-1-911581-94-9

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Tel: 01904 615905

www.jrf.org.uk
Ref: 3350