

## A single parents' manifesto for change

**We know that single parents are likely to be a hotly debated issue in the 2010 general election. Whether it's arguments about 'broken families' or proposals to tackle child poverty, the lives of single parent families are often placed centre stage.**

But while politicians often talk about single parents, they don't often talk – or listen – to them. Gingerbread and Netmums wanted to know what single parents' priorities were for the next Government in three key areas of their lives: money,<sup>1</sup> work and family. So we asked them. A survey was sent to Gingerbread's membership and put on the Netmums website, and 945 single parents responded.<sup>2</sup> This manifesto sets out where they want to see change.

### What single parents want

- Longer repayment periods for overpaid benefits and tax credits
- More financial help with childcare
- More funding for independent advice services
- More jobs at school hours
- More out-of-school activities for older children
- More support for parents when their relationship is breaking down
- More support for children at school if their parents separate

**One in four families in the UK are now headed by a single parent – that's 1.9 million potential voters. Nine out of ten of them are mothers, and their average age is 36. Many more families will be headed by people who used to parent alone, or who were themselves brought up by a single parent. Listening to parents' voices is the best way to improve the lives of these families – and the three million children living in them.**

# Money

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**It's shocking that over half of children in single parent families still live in poverty. The figures are highest for children whose parents are out of work and 31 per cent of families in this position run out of money by the end of the month.<sup>3</sup> But work isn't yet a guaranteed route out of poverty and 31 per cent of children whose single parent is working are still poor. We're pleased that all political parties have signed up to the Child Poverty Bill and promised to end child poverty by 2020. But families need more help now.**

Families told us that they wanted:

## ■ **Longer repayment periods for overpaid benefits and tax credits**

*'The stress of paying back an overpayment on tax credits was too much and the debt we got into when they cut our money was the nail in the coffin.'*<sup>4</sup>

Sixty-six per cent of single parents placed this as one of their top three priorities for change when we asked them about their priorities for money.

Overpayments are an inherent part of the current tax credit system. Although the number of families who have to pay back overpaid tax credits has fallen,<sup>5</sup> the impact of paying back a tax credit or benefit debt can hit families hard, meaning financial uncertainty and hardship. Gingerbread believes that Government should consider moving to fixed six monthly awards of tax credits, rather than the current flexible system, to prevent families running the risk of an overpayment.

## ■ **More financial help with childcare**

*'Childcare is too expensive ... even with the help that they give you on tax credits it's still too much to pay each week without causing hardship.'*

Fifty-five per cent of single parents chose this as one of their top three responses when we asked about money and 54 per cent chose this option when we asked about combining work and family.

Gingerbread believes that Government should increase the amount of childcare costs met through the Working Tax Credit from 80 per cent to 100 per cent. This would make a big difference to family budgets, and be easier for families to understand.

# Work

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**Most single parents, 57 per cent, are now in paid work.<sup>6</sup> Single parents have got jobs more quickly than any other disadvantaged group over the last ten years, and the employment rate for this group has risen by twelve percentage points since 1997. But too many families still face challenges finding jobs they can combine with family life, and that lift their families out of poverty.**

Families told us that they wanted:

## ■ **Government to encourage more employers to offer jobs at school hours**

*‘A better range of part time jobs available within school hours actually being offered to the parents. It is actually really surprising the number of companies who offer part time roles but yet do not cater for the school hours.’*

Sixty-five per cent of parents chose this as one of their top three responses when we asked them about policies to help combine work and family life.

We know that while most single parents want to work, finding a job to fit in with their children, and particularly one that allows them to pick up their children from school, can be a major challenge. Gingerbread believes that Government could do more within the whole public sector to offer jobs at school hours, and to specify that this is important when it contracts with other companies.

## ■ **More out-of-school activities for older children**

*‘More facilities for childcare for older children during the school holidays. Childminders are geared for primary school children but once a child reaches secondary school there is little provision for their care. They are not old enough to look after themselves while a parent goes to school. Any schemes are usually far too costly.’*

Forty-five per cent of parents chose this as one of their top three responses when we asked them about policies to help combine work and family life.

Welfare reforms have meant that more single parents with older children are being required to look for work, but childcare is particularly difficult to find for this group. Piecing together a patchwork of arrangements or worrying about a child being ‘home alone’ creates extra stress not just for single working parents, but for their children as well.<sup>7</sup> Fifty-nine per cent of Family Information Services report that there is insufficient childcare for children aged over 12, compared to 27 per cent for under fives, and 36 per cent for five to eleven year olds.<sup>8</sup> Such services may work better if they are not badged as ‘childcare’, a term that parents and teenagers may not relate to.<sup>9</sup>

# Family

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**One in four families is now headed by a single parent – a proportion that has stayed the same for the last decade. Most single parents have previously been married or in a relationship and never expected to be raising a child alone. Whatever the route into single parenthood – separation, divorce or bereavement – coping with changed circumstances can be a struggle, particularly at first. Families need help to make practical arrangements about their housing, finances and legal issues. Many also need support in dealing with the emotional fall-out.**

Families told us that they wanted:

## ■ **Services that give practical advice to parents on money, housing and legal rights**

*‘Practical advice and support for parents - I am unsure on many issues, including contact arrangements and whether I am obliged to insist my children see their father when I’m unsure of his ability to look after them. I have many queries about money, legal rights, etc., and really don’t know where to go. If such advice exists then please could the government publicise it. If not then it needs to be provided ...’*

Fifty-two per cent of parents chose this as one of their top three responses when we asked them about policies to help deal with their family life.

Research by Gingerbread found that 63 per cent of single parents had had to deal with a benefits problem in the last year, 53 per cent with a problem related to contact, and 48 per cent with a problem related to debt.<sup>10</sup> Around half of these problems had lasted for over a year. The research also found that many single parents were struggling to access the advice they needed: 41 per cent had wanted face to face and been unable to find it, 32 per cent had not been able to find telephone advice, and 12 per cent had not been able to find any advice at all. Government needs to fund independent advice services as a key part of helping families.

## ■ **More support for parents when their relationship is breaking down**

*‘Somewhere to go to discuss contact, rather than having to go to court which is so stressful as a parent and for the children.’*

Fifty per cent of parents chose this as one of their top three responses when we asked them about policies to help deal with their family life.

We know that what goes on inside families is more important than family structure in determining how children get on.<sup>11</sup> One of the most damaging things for children is experiencing conflict between their parents, whether this is before, during or after separation. There is such a thing as a ‘good separation’ and research suggests that children whose parents separate amicably do better.<sup>12</sup> The Kids in the Middle campaign, of which Gingerbread is a founder member, has therefore been calling for more support to parents going through separation to help them avoid conflict, and maintain their parenting relationship.

## ■ More support for children at school if their parents separate

*'I would like to see more support in the schools so the children could speak to someone about their worries and it would be great to see more support in Children's Centres too so the parents and children alike could have someone to talk to.'*

Fifty per cent of parents chose this as one of their top three responses when we asked them about policies to help deal with their family life.

Gingerbread's research with parents and children about contact arrangements found that children were not always able to tell their parents what they were feeling.<sup>13</sup> Children may need to go elsewhere for help. Parents in this study whose children had had extra support through the school were very positive about the impact of this. Schools are an obvious place for children to access support; this support needs to be confidential and linked in with other pastoral care services, so that children feel that it is normal to ask for help in this area.

## Let's Lose the Labels Gingerbread

We're delighted that all three party leaders have promised to tackle the stereotypes and stigma that too many single parents still face, and to back Gingerbread's Let's Lose the Labels campaign. But, as this manifesto shows, single parents and their children need practical help and support too. Money is tight for Government, but it's also tight for the 1.9 million single parent families in Britain today. Single parents want to hear from politicians how their families will be protected and supported by the next Government. Gingerbread and Netmums hope that this will be the election when politicians talk to single parents rather than about them. 1.9 million potential voters will be waiting to hear what they say.

**Please join the three party leaders and support our campaign to challenge prejudice against single parents.**

View our campaign video, read the literature and **sign the pledge** at [www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)

# Single Parent

# FACTFILE

## Myths and labels abound about single parents

Here are the facts



### **Single parent families are an ordinary part of family life**

- Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of households with dependent children are single parent families,<sup>14</sup> and there are 1.9 million single parents in Britain today.<sup>15</sup>
- There are 3 million children living in a single parent household, (24 per cent of all dependent children).<sup>16</sup>
- Single parents are predominantly women, although 8 per cent of single parents are fathers.<sup>17</sup> Single fathers are more likely to be widowed than single mothers (12 per cent of single fathers are widowed, compared with 5 per cent of single mothers), and their children tend to be older.<sup>18</sup>
- Ninety per cent of single parents are White, 5 per cent are Black, 2 per cent are Asian and 3 per cent fall into other categories.<sup>19</sup>



### **The proportion of single parent families has increased since the 1970s, but it hasn't changed much in the last ten years**

- In 1971 just 8 per cent of families with children were single parent families.
- In 1998 24 per cent of families with children were single parent families.
- In 2007 23 per cent of families with children were single parent families.<sup>20</sup>

## 3

### **Very few single parents are 'unmarried teenagers'**

- Just 2 per cent of single parents are teenagers.<sup>21</sup>
- The median age for a single parent is 36.<sup>22</sup>
- The majority of single parents had their children within marriage – 55 per cent are separated from marriage, divorced or widowed.<sup>23</sup> Only 6 per cent of all births are registered alone, and 9 per cent are registered to two parents who live apart.<sup>24</sup>
- The proportion of single parents who have never been married (though most of them will have cohabited with a partner) has remained stable for the last ten years.<sup>25</sup>

## 4

### **Single parent families are more likely to be affected by poverty**

- Over half (52 per cent) of children in single parent families are poor, compared to 25 per cent of children in couple families.<sup>26</sup>
- Only two-fifths of single parents receive maintenance from their child's other parent.<sup>27</sup>
- Paid work is not a guaranteed route out of poverty for single parents; the poverty rate for single parent families where the parent works part time is 32 per cent, and 22 per cent where the parent works full time.<sup>28</sup>
- The median weekly income for working single parent families is £404.52, compared with £618.44 for couple families with one worker.<sup>29</sup>

## 5

### **Single parents work**

- The latest employment figures show that 56.7 per cent of lone parents are in work, up 12 percentage points since 1997. In the same period, the employment rate of mothers in couples has risen three percentage points to 71 per cent.<sup>30</sup>
- The employment rate for single parents varies depending on the age of their youngest child. Once children are 12 or over, single parents' employment rate is similar to, or higher than, the employment rate for mothers in couples (71 per cent of single parents whose child is 12-15 are in work).<sup>31</sup>
- Where single parents are not working, this is often because there are health issues that make work difficult: 36 per cent of unemployed single parents have a disability or longstanding illness and 30 per cent have a child with a disability.<sup>32</sup>

# Notes

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- 1 Questions on money were only answered by Gingerbread members, in an earlier survey, with 905 respondents. Further details of this survey are available in Peacey V (2010) Family finances. Gingerbread.
- 2 Not all of those who took part in the survey answered all questions. Parents were given a number of options to choose from in each area, and also asked for their suggestions.
- 3 Peacey V (2010) Family Finances. Gingerbread.
- 4 All quotes come from single parents who responded to our survey.
- 5 HMRC (2009) Child and Working Tax Credit Statistics Finalised Awards 2007-08, Supplement on payments in 2007-08 <http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/personal-tax-credits/ctcw-tax-credit-final-may09-sup.pdf>
- 6 Figures commissioned by Gingerbread from the Labour Force Survey, Q2 2009.
- 7 Tess Ridge and Jane Millar (2008) Work and well-being over time: lone mothers and their children Department for Work and Pensions.
- 8 Daycare Trust Childcare Costs survey 2010.
- 9 Victoria Peacey (2009) Signing on and stepping up? Single parents' experience of welfare reform. Gingerbread.
- 10 Richard Moorhead, Mark Sefton and Gillian Douglas (2004) The advice needs of lone parents. National Council for One Parent Families (now Gingerbread).
- 11 Ann Mooney, Chris Oliver and Marjorie Smith (2009) Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-being. Evidence Review Research Report DCSF-RR113.
- 12 Golombok (2000) Parenting - What really counts? cited in [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/111945/families\\_in\\_britain.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/111945/families_in_britain.pdf)
- 13 Hunt J and Peacey V (2009) I'm not saying it was easy: contact problems in separated families. Gingerbread.
- 14 Table 3.7, General Household Survey 2007, Office for National Statistics.
- 15 Economic and Labour Market Review, February 2009, Office for National Statistics.
- 16 Three million children in single parent families:
- 17 Social Trends 39, Office for National Statistics (2008).
- 18 Analysis of Labour Force Survey data from April-June 2006 produced for Gingerbread.
- 19 Families with children in Britain: findings from the 2007 Families and Children Study (FACS). DWP research report 578.
- 20 Table 3.6, General Household Survey 2007, Office for National Statistics.
- 21 Derived from Families and Children Study data for 2005.
- 22 Gingerbread analysis of data from the Families and Children Study, 2005. 'Median' is the midway point of the distribution - the point at which half the sample are older and half are younger.
- 23 Labour Force Survey data Spring 2006, produced for Gingerbread.
- 24 ONS Statistical Bulletin Dec 2009.
- 25 Table 3.6, General Household Survey 2007, Office for National Statistics.
- 26 Households Below Average Income; an analysis of the income distribution 1994/5 - 2007/8. Department for Work and Pensions (2009). Table 4.11ts.
- 27 Table 15.1 Families with Children in Britain: Findings from the 2007 Family and Children Study, DWP Research Report No 578.
- 28 Households Below Average Income; an analysis of the income distribution 1994/5 - 2007/8. Department for Work and Pensions (2009). Table 4.11ts.
- 29 Analysis of Expenditure and Food Survey 2007 data; does not include Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit as income. In Peacey V (2010) Family Finances. Gingerbread.
- 30 Labour Force Survey April-June 2009, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=409>
- 31 Analysis of Labour Force Survey data from April-June 2009 produced for Gingerbread, in Peacey V (2009) Signing on and stepping up? Single parents' experience of welfare reform. Gingerbread.
- 32 Families with children in Britain: findings from the 2007 Families and Children Study (FACS). DWP research report 578.

This manifesto is based on the results of 945 responses from single parents to a survey sent to Gingerbread's membership and published on the Netmums website.

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Netmums is a social networking website connecting and supporting mums across the UK. The largest parenting website in the country, Netmums now has over one million unique users every month.

**Gingerbread**  
Single parents, equal families

Gingerbread is the charity which works nationally and locally, for and with single parent families, to improve their lives. We achieve change by championing their voices and needs and providing support services.

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