

Gingerbread

Single parents, equal families



Change framework

Our journey to becoming a learning organisation

April 2019

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About Gingerbread

Gingerbread is the leading national charity working with single parent families. Our mission is to champion and enable single parent families to live secure, happy and fulfilling lives.

Since 1918 we've been supporting, advising and campaigning with single parents to help them meet their family's needs and achieve their goals.

We want to create a world in which diverse families can thrive. We won't stop working until we achieve this vision. Whatever success means for a single parent – a healthy family, a flexible job, stable finances or a chance to study – we work with them to make it happen.

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- Toynbee Hall
- Trust for London
- Barrow Cadbury Trust
- Legal Education Foundation
- Centre for Youth Impact
- London Marathon Charitable Trust
- ButtleUK
- London Funders
- Nesta
- Early Intervention Foundation

ASK
RESEARCH



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Foreword

Gingerbread is the only national charity dedicated to working for and with single parent families. We provide advice, information and support directly to single parents. We campaign with them to make their voices heard and to change the systems, attitudes and policies that continue to disadvantage single parent families from flourishing in society.

Last year we celebrated Gingerbread's centenary. Much progress has been made in the last 100 years, but a great deal remains to be done. Too many single parent families remain trapped in poverty, socially isolated and struggling to manage work and caring (1 in 4 Report, Gingerbread 2018).

This report provides an overview of the processes and key evidence we used to develop Gingerbread's Change Framework. Our Change Framework is an integral part of our journey to becoming a learning organisation. In 2017 we began a strategic review of the organisation's services, impact and business model. Two years into this process, the feedback from single parents, our own reflections, and the external evidence delivers a powerful message and roadmap for Gingerbread's future focus. From 2019 we are now looking at how we respond to these learnings by delivering our new strategy. We want to celebrate our successes but also be honest about what we need to change. This data and insight has helped us to make better decisions on how Gingerbread can improve the lives of single parent families.

We have published this report to share insights and learning on single parents' needs. Whether you're a leader, an evaluation practitioner, or an organisation supporting single parents, it's helpful to understand how we have used data to make key decisions. A key part of our strategy is working with others to build transparent and open partnerships to deliver our strategy to 2021 and beyond. We hope this report will begin conversations and build on existing work with others to develop a more focused approach on our partnership working.

Through our ambitious new strategy, we at Gingerbread must support single parents, especially to respond to predictions that poverty will rise. To do this we need to focus on evidence-based strategy, service design, and learning to maximise our impact for single parent families. This is the early stage of our learning journey. We aspire to be more adaptable and tailored to the changing needs of single parents and be able to grow, deliver, and sustain our vision for the future.

Fran Parry

Trustee for Gingerbread

Introduction

Gingerbread's strategy for 2018-2021

Gingerbread is the leading national charity for single parents and has been working since 1918 to champion and support single parent families by delivering a range of support services and campaigning activity.

In 2017 with a new Chief Executive in post we undertook a strategic review of our organisation's services, impact and business model. To support this work we secured funding from the City Bridge Trust to develop a change framework that would help map our strategy objectives to key shared corporate outcomes, and prioritise the services we need to deliver.

Its strategy focuses on four core areas for single parents:

- Stability for single parents;
- Families can thrive;
- Families are valued; and
- Fit for the future.

As part of our strategic review from 2018 we decided to wind down our delivery of employment contracts in their current form and not bid for further contracts of this type. This change allows us to focus our resources towards delivering more sustainable work outcomes for single parents in line with our strategic goals and to reduce the financial losses associated with these contracts. These changes involved some difficult staffing decisions – meaning that a number of talented, valued staff members will be leaving the organisation over the next 3 years as contracts end, and our office spaces in Wales, Liverpool and Manchester will close.

We are working hard to make sure that our services continue to meet the needs of single parents across England and Wales and that Gingerbread remains fit for the future. The Change Framework has been part of the process, drawing on staff experience and expertise of what we have delivered in the past. As well as collecting, analysing, and using existing and new data to help make decisions on what should be our core impacts on single parent families in the future.

Research aims

With the strategic grant from City Bridge Trust we wanted to develop an evidence base to support decision-making on corporate outcomes. The specific research objectives were:

- To identify where Gingerbread can deliver short-term and long-term impact for single parents
- To consult and involve single parents in order to deepen our understanding of their needs and Gingerbread's role
- To identify where the gaps in Gingerbread's knowledge are in order to plan future areas of inquiry, partnership and opportunity

We commissioned and undertook:

- Qualitative research with single parents to understand their needs at different life stages
- A rapid review of Gingerbread's data, and a review of existing research and external literature on single parents' support needs
- Consultation with staff and trustees
- Consultation with external stakeholders including funders, third sector organisations with an interest in

single parents, and evaluation experts

Gingerbread's change framework

The Change Framework is a key product of our evaluation and learning work in year one of a new three year strategy. It provides direction and purpose for the work Gingerbread are currently doing and work we plan to do in the next two years.

This report provides a summary of the process we have undertaken to review evidence and involve beneficiaries, staff and trustees in this process. The purpose of the report is to share learning on our approach to evidence-based strategy development and service design. This is the beginning of Gingerbread's journey to become a learning organisation. Whether you're a leader, an evaluation practitioner, or an organisation supporting single parents, we hope it is helpful to understand how we have used data to make key decisions.

The report covers three key sections:

- Section 1: Summary of the evidence we collected, reviewed and analysed; and consultation process with staff, trustees, and stakeholders to develop the change framework
- Section 2: Overview of the Change Framework and next steps
- Section 3: Full qualitative findings from our research with single parents. Many of these findings resonate with what Gingerbread already knows about the single parents that it serves but this is the first time that parents have been asked to reflect on Gingerbread's purpose in such depth and for parents' views on the organisation's services and activities to have been examined alongside their own circumstances and needs.

Full details of other phases of the research are in the full technical appendices report available here on our website.

Section 1: Summary of research findings

1.1 Single parent views

The qualitative work generated very clear findings on how parents view and value Gingerbread's approach and services. This has distinct implications for the organisation's future focus.

What single parents value about Gingerbread

- It recognises and supports single parents
- It provides advice and information
- It helps develop confidence and networks

What single parents think Gingerbread could do better

- Increased advertising and promotion
- Greater clarity about what the organisation does
- Stronger partnerships

What single parents think Gingerbread should focus on

- Mental health and emotional support
- Campaigning and advocacy work
- Strengthening support groups
- Advice and signposting
- Helping parents realise their potential

Recommendations from qualitative review

It is clear that Gingerbread is valued, appreciated and seen as essential by single parents. It is meeting many single parents' needs and supporting them to become more stable and ultimately, thrive. At the same time, there are areas of improvement that might enable Gingerbread to have greater reach while operating more efficiently.

Outreach and engagement

a) Challenges - parents feel that Gingerbread should be clearer about what it does and promote its activities more effectively. This research suggests that ultimately parents expect Gingerbread to be targeting its services to all but the most disadvantaged parents who might be better supported elsewhere.

b) Potential solutions - this may be possible to deliver with an enhanced partnerships model. In doing so, Gingerbread needs to clearly define where its support starts and ends; defining how partners will effectively pick up where it leaves off.

Support groups

Gingerbread's support groups are popular among single parents and are a vital source of local connection. Emotional health was also a strong theme in the qualitative research. Increasing the number and quality of local support groups could present part of the solution to developing Gingerbread's offer in this area.

a) Challenges – the inconsistency in the support groups' availability and quality is an issue for single parents who would like to see this important network enhanced and improved.

b) Potential solutions - parents felt Gingerbread should consider investing in a programme of volunteer training and management to help encourage single parents to take on the role of local-co-ordinator and to give them the skills to deliver this in an effective and consistent way. Effective volunteer training could also open up the support groups to deliver beyond their current model. Groups could become a hub for employment and skills activities with a focus on nurturing parents' confidence and exposing them to new ideas and opportunities.

Partnerships

a) Challenges - at present, Gingerbread's partnerships are not seen as strong enough and this is a missed opportunity.

b) Potential solutions - Better partnerships would strengthen Gingerbread's role as a trusted first port of call and expert on single parent-specific issues, while ensuring that parents are able to receive expert help in areas outside of the organisation's remit including mental health, housing, and domestic violence. Forming an effective network of partnerships would also help with awareness and promotion of Gingerbread services which is currently regarded by parents as being insufficient and inconsistent.

Campaigning and policy

Parents recognise Gingerbread's campaigning and policy as fundamental to the organisation, not least because the activities are unique to Gingerbread.

a) Challenges how can Gingerbread deliver its campaigning activity in a targeted way and communicate this effectively to parents who although not always interested in taking part in campaigns themselves, are grateful that they are happening and want to see them continue long term.

b) Potential solutions - Improved communications with parents in Gingerbread's network to raise awareness of the range of issues Gingerbread campaigns on. Consider how we can improve targeting communication to the preferences and circumstances of parents to drive engagement on specific issues.

1.2 Evidence review: literature and practice

The evidence review was delivered in two parts. First, an internal review which drew on information Gingerbread has collected over the last three years. Evidence sources included project evaluations, membership survey results, strategic papers, management information data and service delivery qualitative data. Second, an external evidence review was commissioned which focused on specific areas that had been identified as worthy of further exploration by both the internal review and qualitative work. The purpose of the external review was to build an understanding of what works and provide evidence to inform the design of services that Gingerbread delivers in these areas.

The evidence review findings strongly echoed those from the qualitative research in many respects and also identified implications for the organisation, both in terms of focus and areas for Gingerbread's further research.

More support for mental health and emotional support

There is little existing evidence on what the exact emotional support needs of single parents are, whether this varies by 'groups' of single parents (i.e. by characteristics, point in their journey, or by other factors) and the ways in which these can best be met. The review work identified a number of factors in the single parent population which are likely to be related to increased risk of mental health issues, such as low income, instability of living arrangements, disability and long-term health conditions, experience of domestic abuse and conflict with the child's other parent. The evidence also points to single parents reporting concerns about their ability to parent their child (focusing on the difference of being raised in a single parent household, stigma and issues with the other parent), and the mental well-being of the child themselves.

Support groups

The evidence review suggests that single parents' emotional well-being needs might be best met by local support groups, however, it is also apparent that it can take a while for single parents to self- identify as a single parent

due to the stigma attached to the term. Reported barriers to other support group models suggest that groups need to operate face to face but may also need to be in parallel with other forms of peer support and information giving – such as the website. One of the greatest challenges here appears to be meeting the needs of such a varied population.

Advice and sign posting

The internal evidence suggests that Gingerbread is seen as being the place to come for advice and information for single parents. Gingerbread was clearly regarded as being the best provider of this with its very well-developed understanding of single parents' experiences and the factors affecting them. Therefore, although the organisation may need to partner with other organisations or providers who bring in different expertise (for example, emotional support or housing) single-parent specific advice should still sit within Gingerbread and utilise this internal understanding.

Campaign and advocacy work

Internal evidence identifies that single parents value the campaigning and advocacy work that Gingerbread carries out and express a strong level of interest in engaging with this (although this is not consistently reflected in actual engagement levels). Campaigning and advocacy work are integral to Gingerbread and yet potentially the least well understood in terms of the impact it has – both on single parents themselves and society more widely. Future campaigns should involve an underpinning theory of change with aligned impact measurements to clearly set out the intention of Gingerbread's work in this area.

1.3 Staff consultation

Throughout the project Gingerbread's staff and trustees were consulted on their views on Gingerbread's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for future development. This process was facilitated by an external consultant. The consultation process involved:

- A working group of staff from teams and positions across the organisation who attended two half-day workshops
- Phone interviews with a selection of key staff and trustees
- A staff development day with all staff to review the evidence outputs and draft framework
- A trustee development session to review evidence outputs and draft framework

Key findings from the staff consultations include:

- Staff highlighted that Gingerbread's network of single parents is one of its greatest assets but that we need to invest in it more pro-actively
- Staff acknowledged that Gingerbread's face-to-face work is good at supporting single parents to develop confidence and networks but there was appreciation that this doesn't fit with the outcomes of some existing employment focussed contracts
- Staff recognise Gingerbread's excellent reputation for advice, policy and research but recognise more can be done to build greater synergies across these different areas of work and links to the organisation's local support groups
- Staff identified that Gingerbread currently works with a range of organisations but thinks it could work more effectively to focus on building and managing strategic partnerships

1.4 Stakeholder feedback

Towards the end of the project in January 2019 we invited a range of external stakeholders to test our draft change framework. This included representatives from funders, third sector organisations with an interest in single parents, and research and impact specialists. Key areas of feedback included:

Partnerships

Partnerships feature strongly in delivering Gingerbread's Change Framework but more detail is required on the specific purpose of partnerships, where they fit within the organisation, and the nature of partnerships that Gingerbread needs to build.

Specific questions to be explored in the development of a partnership working approach for Gingerbread should include:

- What are the pros and cons of multi-lateral and bi-lateral partnerships to deliver future strategy?
- Are there opportunities for the family sector to collectively develop shared impact measures?
- Can future partnerships include specialist support for single parent families that face multiple disadvantages?
- Can Gingerbread establish better referral routes between organisations?

A key focus for 2019/20 will be considering the purpose, nature, and priorities for our approach to building partnerships. We will continue conversations with stakeholders to build a more comprehensive model of partnership working for the future.

Building a movement of single parents

Gingerbread's reach, reputation, and value to single parents creates a unique opportunity to connect individuals with shared interests. To effectively leverage the passions, talent, and skills of this movement Gingerbread should consider:

- Mobilising single parents to volunteer and initiate action, with more explicit links to influencing and campaigns (recognising caring commitments)
- Achieving the right balance between maintaining the character and informality of its existing nationwide friendship groups
- Promoting positive stories on how to empower single parents and their families to thrive and better understand the distance they have travelled with Gingerbread's support

Campaigning and policy change for single parents

Gingerbread is well-known for its campaigning and influencing work to champion the needs of single parent families. Stakeholders wanted to hear more on the detailed focus of this work over the next two years, specifically:

- What is the focus of Gingerbread's policy and campaign work in the current political climate?
- Is there scope to explore a variety of tactics and methods to influence that draw on the lived experience of single parents, specialist advice and evidence? This could include strategic litigation and working through policy networks at a local level
- Can Gingerbread play a role in bringing organisations together to look at how we work collaboratively to address the wider system changes required to support single parents to thrive?

Section 2: Change Framework

2.1 What is Gingerbread's Change Framework?

The outcome of the research and consultation process was to develop a Change Framework of how Gingerbread will deliver its 2018 – 2021 strategy – see Diagram 1 on page 12. Similar to a theory of change this identifies shared short-term and long-term outcomes that we will work to deliver across our movement, services, policy and influencing work. The aim of Gingerbread's Change Framework is to prioritise key outcomes we want to achieve across our offer, and set out the causal links between our activities and end goal. This will help us to re-design our services and programmes, as well as provide a theoretical framework to underpin our data collection and measurement activities across the organisation.

2.2 Why do we need a change framework?

Like many charities today we face tough decisions about where we focus our efforts and how we financially support this. Through our strategic review process and the development of our new 2018 – 2021 strategy it became clear that single parents' needs were changing and we needed to adapt what we do as an organisation to deliver this. For a long time we have used evidence and insight to successfully campaign and influence policy and public debate. However, we have rarely used this approach to redesign services and programmes, too often these have responded to funder requirements.

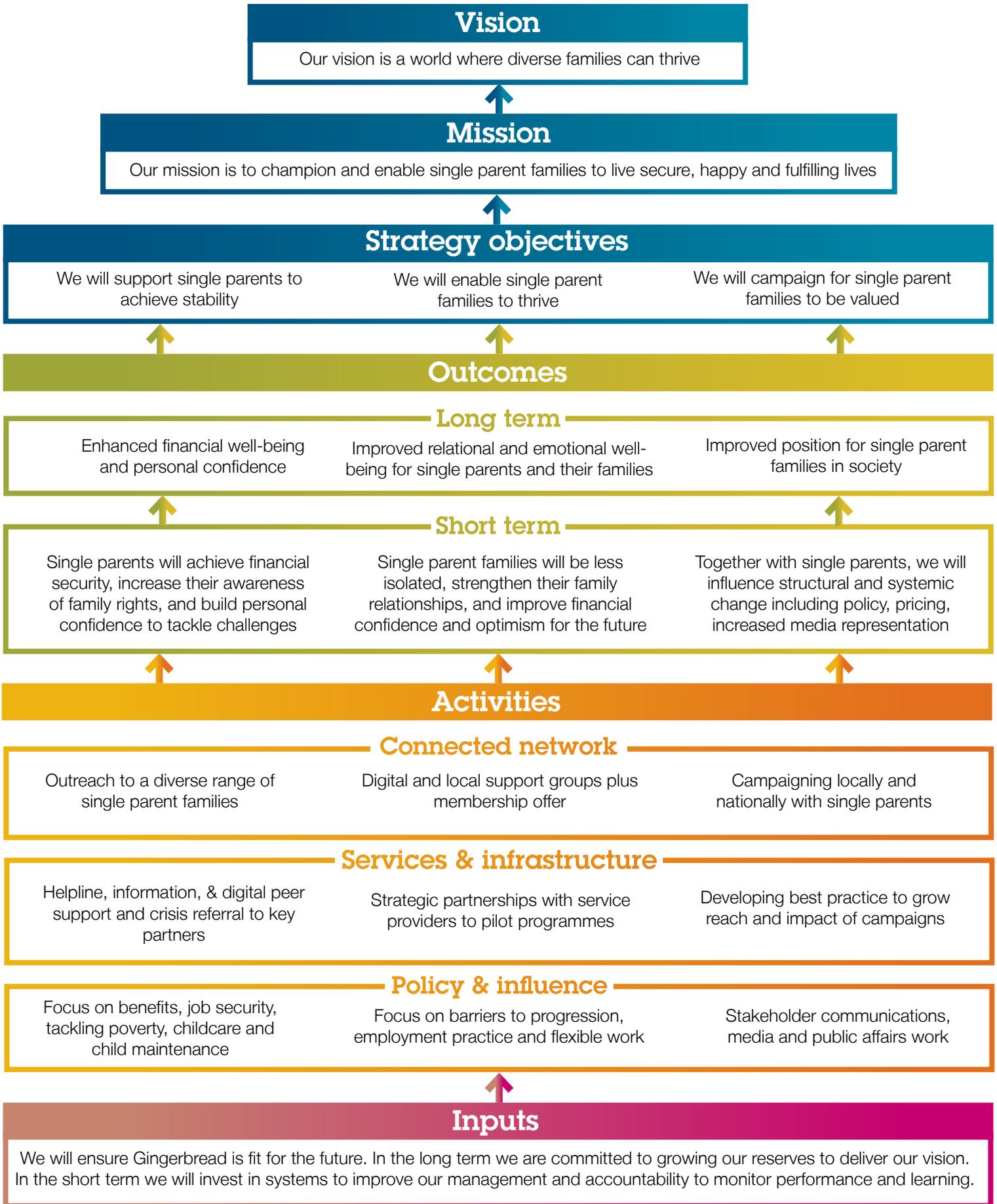
The process to develop our change framework has provided clarity of focus on what we deliver and a better understanding of where to scale our impact. This will guide decisions moving forward to help streamline our offer, develop our services, and ensure that as an organisation we are fit for the future to meet needs of single parents in the longer term.

Through the qualitative research we have achieved a thorough understanding of single parent perspectives on what they value about Gingerbread, as well as what they think we should be developing in the future. Through the evidence review we have been able to draw on evidence, best practice, and up to date data to really understand single parent family needs. Through the consultation process with staff and trustees we have drawn on experience and insight from across the organisation to try to embed a learning culture in which everyone is involved in considering our impact and being curious of what works.

Gingerbread's Change Framework is part of an intentional learning journey, towards a more comprehensive approach to achieving cross organisational impact and evidence-based practices, services and programmes. The Change Framework represents the key outcomes that we will focus on delivering.

2.3 Change Framework

Diagram 1



2.4 What next in our learning journey?

Developing an organisational measurement framework

Staff will continue to be involved in the implementation of the Change Framework. With their expertise we will translate this organisational framework into specific work areas and programmes within our operational plan. We will work towards establishing appropriate theories of change for Gingerbread's services, programmes and campaigns. Together, these individual theories will detail how Gingerbread proposes to bring about the changes set out in the change framework, what success will look like in the short- and longer-term, what activities will be undertaken and how the impact of these activities will be measured. Our priority areas for 2019/20 will include: peer support services, advice services, and campaign and policy work.

To support the measurement of Gingerbread's work, more consistent data about single parents will be routinely collected. This will focus on; parent', family and personal characteristics, how families find out about Gingerbread, what they are looking for and how well their contact with Gingerbread meets these needs. From May 2018 we have collected standardised demographic information on our 16,000 plus and growing members. We will build on this to introduce standard measures on outcomes in the Change Framework in addition to specific outcomes that funders require.

Building a movement of single parents

We have secured a strategic grant through the Big Lottery Community Fund to redevelop our peer support services for single parents through 2019 and 2020. As part of this programme we will research, pilot, and redesign the support we provide for our 101 friendship groups across England and Wales. This will include consideration of key factors including the accessibility and diversity of groups; building an appropriate model of volunteer support and training; and providing high quality resources to deliver key impacts for single parents including stronger networks, emotional support, and confidence to tackle challenges. This will provide an important starting point to look at how we build a local and online presence to become the backbone of a movement for single parents.

Campaigning and policy work

Gingerbread will continue to support single parents to be active campaigners and advocates for change. With new funding from Esmee Fairburn and Fair by Design we will embed single parents' voices and agency within our policy, research and campaigning work as we continue to work with them to achieve change in key areas such as Universal Credit, child maintenance, flexible and sustainable work and affordable childcare.

Partnerships

We recognise that developing meaningful partnerships requires thoughtful strategic decision making, time and resource. We will continue consulting and working with existing partners and allies to identify priorities for partnership, the key elements that will be needed to support partnership working and how this can be resourced.

Section 3: Qualitative review: Single parent needs

The qualitative strand of this research provides valuable, rich insight into the views and needs of single parents. This section of the report will display the evidence generated as result of the qualitative research conducted by an independent researcher. Through the lens of single parents, it explores the services Gingerbread provides and draws on implications of the findings to develop the change framework.

Aims of the qualitative work

The qualitative research was designed to inform the development of the change framework by exploring what single parents think Gingerbread should be focusing on and exploring single parents' support needs at different stages in their lives.

The specific research objectives were:

1. To identify the clear areas of short-term and long-term impact that Gingerbread can deliver for single parents;
2. To involve and consult single parents in order to deepen our understanding of their needs and the role of Gingerbread; and
3. To identify where the gaps in Gingerbread's knowledge are in order to plan future areas of inquiry, partnership and opportunity.

The qualitative work sought to address the following research questions:

- Why are single parents contacting Gingerbread?
- What do single parents get from Gingerbread?
- How much do single parents value Gingerbread's services?
- What do single parents want from Gingerbread?
- What are the moments when single parents need support from Gingerbread?
- How does what they want relate to the stage they're at?
- What does stability look like for single parents and how can they be supported in achieving it?
- What does thriving look like for single parents and how can they be supported to achieve it?
- What could Gingerbread do in the short-term to support single parents?
- What could Gingerbread do in the longer-term to support single parents?

Methodology

Qualitative research is an ideal methodology to employ when rich, descriptive data is sought. The aim is to capture a range of experiences and then explore these, unpacking the participants' responses in detail. Qualitative approaches aim to map the range of views that exist on an issue rather than the prevalence of those views (which would be measured by a quantitative approach such as a survey). It does this by building a sample of participants that is sufficiently diverse in characteristics to ensure a range of experiences and viewpoints. Through careful sampling, it is possible to reach a point of 'saturation'. This means that most of the views and perceptions which may be relevant to the research are uncovered, and conducting further interviews is unlikely to yield any new discoveries. For this study, depth interviews were carried out by phone with 22 single parents who were sampled according to a range of criteria. The resulting sample included single mums and dads from all walks of life and who had become single parents in very different ways, in some cases parents were the victims of domestic

violence in others a relationship had broken down or a partner had died and in some cases the participants had actively chosen to be single parents. The table below shows both the quotas for specific characteristics that were set and the number that were achieved in the sample.

Table 1: Characteristics of parents in sample

Characteristic	Quota	Number achieved
Male	3	3
Female	3	19
Employed	2	5
Temporary employment	2	3
Unemployed	2	10
Youngest child under 5	4	7
Previous active engagement with Gingerbread	3	20
No active engagement with Gingerbread	2	2
BME parents	2	10
London	5	7
Wales	5	7

Since single parents are a very diverse group we cannot hope to have captured the full range of parents' experiences in this study. However, the careful sampling approach and level of saturation evident in the analysis mean that we can be reasonably confident that the high-level themes that have emerged from this research would translate to the wider single-parent population even if the granularity of individual experience varies.

Interviews were carried out by telephone between June and September 2018, lasted around an hour and were recorded with participants' permission and then transcribed.

Direct anonymised quotes from the interviews are included within this report.

3.1 The single parent journey

In order to understand where Gingerbread should be targeting its services to best help single parents, the qualitative work focused on exploring the journeys into single parenthood that individual parents had taken. This exploration of their journeys had a specific emphasis on the support that parents felt they had needed at each stage and how they would describe their current situation. The new Gingerbread strategy aims to help single parents to move first to a more stable situation and then to a point where they are thriving. These concepts were explored with parents in the interviews using the terms 'striving', 'stable' and 'thriving'. Parents were asked to imagine a line with striving (described as really struggling) at one end, thriving (everything being great) at the other and stable around half way between and to plot themselves along that line. They were asked to describe both what their current position looked like and what would move them closer to stable or thriving. This exercise helps us to understand a little more about the types of support that single parents need at each stage of their journey and to consider how this might be reflected in Gingerbread's strategy.

Although the image of a continuum has been used for this work and as a tool for helping to develop Gingerbread's strategy, it is fully recognised that single parents' lives do not necessarily follow a linear path and that this approach simplifies what is often a very complex experience. The accounts that single parents gave us were of course also dependent on how they felt about their situation at the specific time of the interview and the level of comparison

with others that each parent was drawing on. Each single parent journey will be unique and influenced by multiple factors, however, at a generic level, these findings can help us to draw out what single parents feel is important to them, where their support needs are currently not being met, and what would help to move them along in their own personal journey.

Diagram 2: Striving to thriving continuum



Striving to stable

Asking parents to plot themselves along a line in this way, creates three distinct stages to the single parent journey. The data reveals that during the first stage which sits between striving and stable on the continuum, there is a sense of immediacy and a need to pin down the mechanics of being a single parent and put in place the systems and support that will allow them to function effectively as a family. This might include sorting out housing, employment or childcare. It may also focus around managing a new relationship with their ex-partner and include legal issues such as parental agreements and child maintenance. They may have some housing or employment but it's more likely to be temporary or unstable at this point and while the financial position of single parents varies hugely, parents who position themselves towards the striving end of the continuum are more likely to be struggling financially.

“Oh God, well not stable at all given that my house is on the market and I don't have a job.” (Participant I)

Some participants spoke about experiencing a sense of loss on becoming single parents. This included losing housing and jobs but there were also stories of friendships breaking down because old friends no longer invited them to gatherings as they were not part of a couple and because friends who hadn't single parented couldn't always understand the specific challenges and sense of isolation that it brought. This sense of loss was very prevalent during the striving to stable part of the single parent journey.

Stable

The second stage is about being more stable. At this point parents largely have their family's basic needs met and are more likely to be in employment or have the right benefits in place, have a satisfactory housing situation and have negotiated child access arrangements if relevant. They may be struggling financially or not be where they want to be in terms of housing or employment options but they are at least managing to get by day to day in the short to medium term.

“Things can change and obviously coping with major things on your own is hard, so you're going to have ups and down. Emotionally, I'm more stable now. It's not as if I'm with anybody. I'm still a single parent, I don't have a partner. It's very hard for me to get out, let alone meet anyone. I feel, in myself, I'm more able to cope and the kids seem to be okay. Financially, it's hard. I want to get back out to work properly but I'm going to have to wait a bit until (my youngest child) is at secondary school.” (Participant D)

While some of the fundamental issues are pinned down by this stage, parents may feel as though their life is mundane and focused on simply existing. They may not have a strong network of other parents to draw on and might feel as though they are unable to do much for themselves beyond being a parent. They may also still have a difficult relationship with their child's other parent and there may be mental health or emotional needs that they feel are not being addressed. While the origin of these emotional support needs varied hugely, there was a clear theme of parents feeling as though they needed more support becoming a single parent either because of the losses they suffered at the point of separation from their partner or because of the pressures of single parenting alone.

Stable to thriving

The third stage in which parents try and move from stable to thriving is about parents starting to rebuild their lives and focus on social networks and mental health. If they had experienced loss on becoming a single parent then this stage was about recovering from those losses and discovering what they wanted from the next stage of their lives. It was notable that between striving and stable (and even a little beyond), the priority around employment was flexible hours that allowed them to manage childcare effectively. For some parents this was at the expense of their chosen career or specific area of work. Moving towards thriving was partly about being able to build on long-term interests and pursue employment aspirations as children got older and childcare was less of an issue.

For some, this stage was also about wanting to reach out and connect with other single parents, to make new networks and friendships.

“I think it would be nicer to have some more friends... I have no social life at all, really. The kids have got a better social life than me. My diary is just full of playdates and school discos and this and that.” (Participant P)

For others, moving on from just being stable was about connecting with their children better and enhancing their family relationship which might include having a more amicable relationship with their ex-partner or finding a way for their children's other parent to have a bigger role in their lives. Some single parents felt that they wouldn't be able to move closer to thriving unless they found a new partner and had someone to share their lives, and parenting responsibilities with.

Another strong theme in the move from stable towards thriving was about addressing emotional well-being and parents spoke about how having more emotional support would be a huge help in getting them to where they wanted to be. While some wanted formal help in the form of a counselling service or therapy for them or their children, others felt that strong peer support may be sufficient.

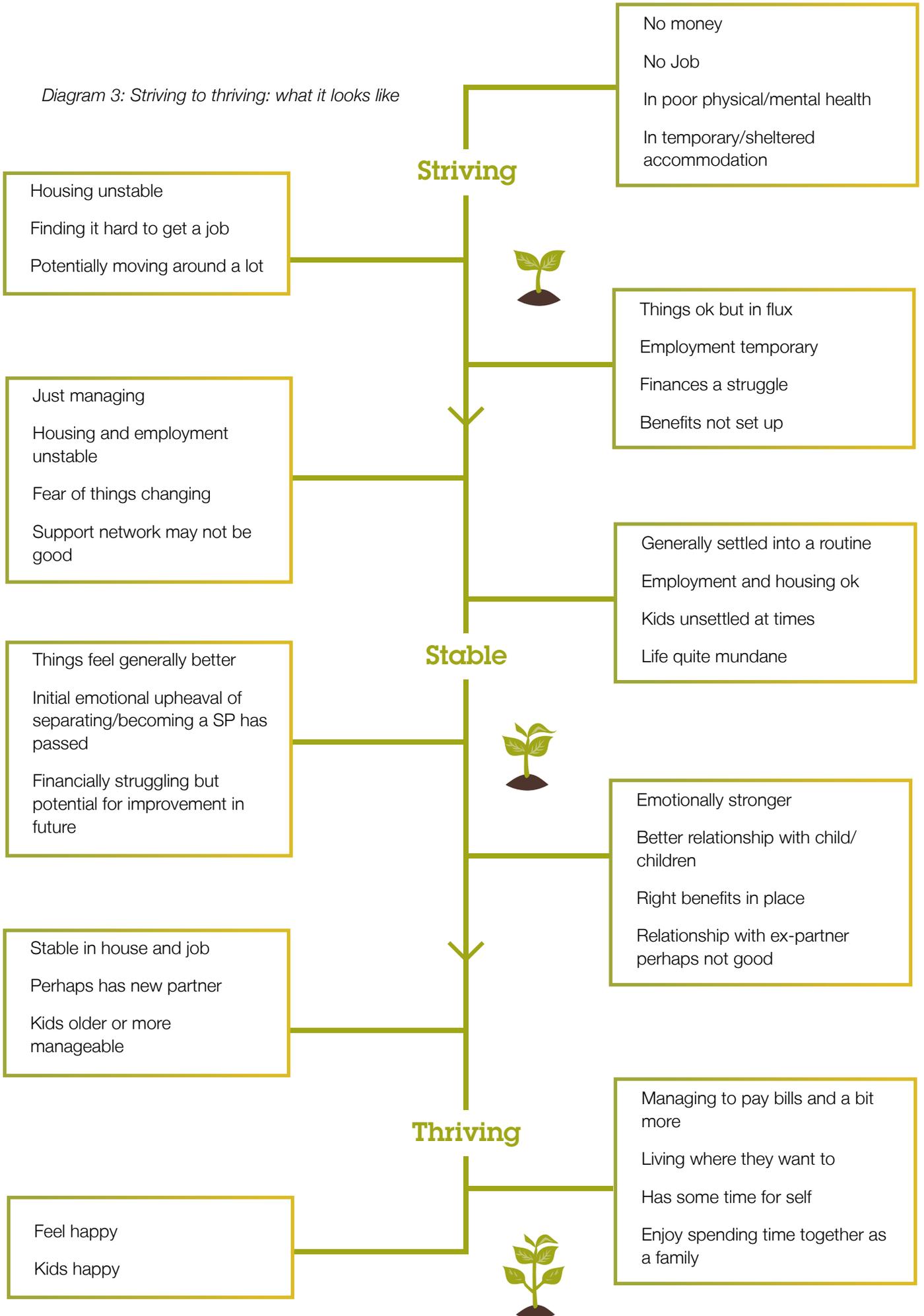
Other factors that parents believed would help move them from stable to thriving included a stronger financial position which might allow them a better quality of life and being able to do more than just exist; by having more childcare, more freedom and time to themselves.

“I think for me it would be able to take the kids out on holidays because we haven't had a holiday in about six years. It's very rare that we get away, get to have a break. Being able to take them on holiday, have enough money - not be greedy, but not have to worry. Be able to do a little bit of a treat every now and then. Maybe even a big treat. Just enough to not have to worry and have the good support in place for myself and the kids as well.” (Participant C)

Single parents clearly start their journey in very different places. Those who chose to become single parents for whatever reason, who were more financially secure or who had a more amicable relationship with their children's other parent spoke about starting their journey further along the continuum perhaps even at stable or above. Those who had other very difficult circumstances such as being the victims of domestic violence or dealing with difficult immigration issues were more likely to have started their journey closer to striving. And of course, there is no guarantee that parents will ever be able to move on from the position in which they find themselves. While some parents we spoke to had clearly been on a journey and been able to move to a happier position, for others there was no immediate sign that things were going to improve and they needed considerable support before a shift might become possible.

Diagram 3 below shows how single parents described being at various stages of the striving to thriving continuum. Each bubble along the diagram is made up of data from multiple parents and paints a picture of what being at that stage might look like for a single parent.

Diagram 3: Striving to thriving: what it looks like



Support needs

While every parent's support needs are clearly different, there were some key themes present in the qualitative data around the types of support that parents said they needed at different stages. There is a clear pattern that in the immediate aftermath of becoming a single parent, people turn to more informal sources of support. This might be in the form of friends, family, neighbours or a church community. When specific support needs arise, parents seek out or are referred to more formal sources of support. For those who are struggling or not yet stable, the support needs are understandably higher and more likely to be focused on essential areas such as housing, finances and legal issues. For those who are more stable the needs change and start to be more about creating a network, peer support and enhanced emotional well-being.

3.2 Getting involved with Gingerbread

The sample for the qualitative work was split between people who had interacted with Gingerbread in some way and those who had either never heard of Gingerbread or had never engaged with the organisation.

People's routes to finding Gingerbread were unsurprisingly very diverse. Some had found Gingerbread through an online search when they first became a single parent; some were signposted from an organisation or service such as Jobcentre Plus, while others were told about Gingerbread by friends or family members who may even have used Gingerbread's services themselves in the past. In some cases, parents had heard of Gingerbread in the past and were reminded of the organisation's existence when they started looking for support;

“I was just sitting on the computer one night and I thought I'll just put in single parent groups or something. I think the computer came up with them then. I thought, oh yes, Gingerbread. Of course, I've heard of them. I remember them sort of.” (Participant F)

Among those who did know about Gingerbread, there were mixed levels of understanding of the organisation. While there were parents who felt well informed about what Gingerbread does and could name a range of Gingerbread's services and activities, others knew very little about what Gingerbread did and in some cases were surprised to know that they offered services beyond those they had interacted with. This group may have had contact with one specific service such as the Helpline or a Learning Skills and Employment programme, or they may have only looked at the website or signed up to the newsletter but had taken away very little information about what else Gingerbread had to offer.

“To be honest, I don't think I feel I know that much because when I did the different courses, there was a vast network of different other areas of Gingerbread that I've only just scratched the surface on.” (Participant A)

This finding suggests that Gingerbread isn't effectively cross-promoting its services to parents or making it clear what it can and can't help with so that its services are front of mind for single parents who have another need in the future.

Motivations for contacting Gingerbread

While there were a wide range of reasons why single parents chose to contact Gingerbread or to use one of their services if offered, these motivations can be grouped into four distinct categories:

1) For help with an urgent issue Single parents who contacted Gingerbread with a difficult or urgent issue were most likely to call the helpline. Urgent issues might include help with housing, benefits, divorce or child maintenance. These parents were more likely to be early on in their single parent journey or at a key point such as needing to agree child access and maintenance arrangements with their ex-partner.

“So there was a short period in between where I just couldn't afford to pay my rent or anything like that and I was getting really anxious about it, because I suffer with anxiety anyway, so we got in contact with Gingerbread to see whether they could suggest anything.” (Participant B)

2) For ongoing information and contact For some parents, Gingerbread is a useful ongoing source of information for less urgent single parent queries. When this was the motivation, single parents were most likely to use the website, newsletters or forum. They may have had specific questions or queries that they needed answering or they may have just enjoyed the sense of connection to other single parents that being a member of Gingerbread gave them. In some cases, parents were browsing Gingerbread's information with an eye to the future – keeping an eye out for possible deals or information about key areas like holiday prices or benefit changes. Single parents who got in touch for these reasons tended to be a little further along on the single parent journey.

3) To meet other single parents and enhance their life Single parents who contacted Gingerbread in order to get in touch with other parents tended to be at stable or beyond and at the point of wanting to do something for themselves. For example, one parent spoke about how they got in touch with Gingerbread when they decided that they needed to do more than just exist and they felt that meeting up with other single parents would enhance their life and give it more meaning.

**“..but it's difficult to meet other people, and I can't go out on a night because I've got the kids, and every other weekend I can't go out again, because I've got the kids. There are a lot of social things going on around here, but they're always in the evenings, and that's no good for me because obviously, I've got the kids. I was hoping with Gingerbread, that there would be single parents in the same position and maybe they might be able to meet throughout the day.”
(Participant P)**

4) For skills and employment support Some single parents used Gingerbread specifically for help with getting into work. These parents tended to be referred to Gingerbread by another agency rather than seeking the organisation out themselves. Within this group there were some who admitted that their primary motivation had actually been the free childcare that accompanied the programme rather than the course itself. However, they did concede that the programme had ultimately offered them a lot more than expected and therefore their motivations for continuing went beyond simply receiving childcare.

3.3 Views of Gingerbread's services

During the interviews, parents were asked to reflect on the specific Gingerbread services that they had used and what they thought of them. From this we were able to build up a partial picture of views of each service. It is only partial because parents were not sampled according to the service that they had used so data is inevitably more complete in some areas than others.

The helpline

What parents valued most about Gingerbread's helpline was that fact that it was able to provide specific advice in a really clear and informative way. When the helpline works well it is seen as empowering parents either to take the next step in what they were doing or to speak to another agency if appropriate. Parents spoke about how helpline advisers really listened to them and aimed to leave them in a better place even if that was just signposting them to another organisation who could help more.

“But when I did get through I was like, ‘Oh, my gosh, I’m glad I waited’, and all this business, because it was really useful, and I felt it was like specific information to you, rather than just general.” (Participant H)

However, there were also complaints about difficulties getting through to the helpline which was reportedly often engaged. The limited opening hours were also flagged as being problematic for parents of younger children who needed to try and call when they had a rare minute without a child demanding their attention. Some parents also felt that while the helpline advisers were very helpful, there was only so much that they could do and that the wide range of needs that single parents have meant that the helpline would never be able to address all single parent queries fully.

Support groups

For some parents, the support groups are clearly a lifeline, a way of connecting with other single parents, of having some adult conversation while their children are occupied and doing something that is for them beyond just being a parent.

“There are a bunch of kids so your child is happy and content playing and you’re able to have a conversation with an adult, it just makes a huge difference.” (Participant I)

Parents spoke about the strength and support that the groups gave them, the fact that no one else understands the challenges of single parenting like another single parent and the value of knowing that there was a support network available even if the practical help they were able to give was limited. Having the group to turn to helped some of the parents get through bad days and low points and Gingerbread was commended for encouraging the establishment of local groups and supporting group co-ordinators.

“I do have a few friends that have children, but no one really understands what it’s like to be a single - so it was nice to have other people to discuss, even things like with the father, ‘Oh, gosh, he hasn’t turned up again’, even things like that. Whereas, if you tell it someone that’s happily married, been with the same man for 20 years- they don’t really understand it, because they haven’t been there.” (Participant H)

Beyond the single parent connection, the support groups were also seen as a way of connecting with the outside world and warding off the isolation that many single parents feel.

“We probably didn’t talk about anything to do with being a single parent. We probably talked about anything else, because the local meets are definitely not political. They’re definitely people moaning about how much shopping has gone up or goodness knows, you know, the car’s broken down again or whatever. It’s just conversation.” (Participant O)

In some cases, parents' interactions with group members remained quite focused around regular meet-ups. In other examples parents spoke about how the support group had led to them developing deeper friendships allowing them to benefit from support outside of the group setting through more informal interactions such as group chats, attending activities together or even sharing holidays. Indeed, for some parents more informal interactions were the main benefit of the groups either because they could not attend regular meet-ups or because they preferred to interact through group chats or impromptu meet-ups.

However, there were also parents to whom the support groups felt inaccessible. For example, one parent spoke about how they still felt ashamed about being a single parent and couldn't bring themselves to join their local support group which felt very imposing and like a big step to take. In another example a parent had contacted their local support group co-ordinator and never heard back and was frustrated because they had not only wanted to make friends themselves but had hoped to introduce their children to other single parent families so that their children realised their family was not unusual.

Parents also spoke about the challenges of trying to juggle attending a support group with work, and in some instances the fact that the group meet-ups were scheduled for the same day and time each week prevented parents from attending.

There were also parents who were frustrated by the fact that there was no Gingerbread support group near them, and parents across the board felt that Gingerbread should do more to support parents in setting up and promoting support groups so they spanned more local areas.

“There isn't one, there isn't, I did look up that, there isn't one. I think the local one to me is (quite far away), they say that you could set up one.... I did think about would it be a good idea to set up, but then it's the time to put into that to keep it going.” (Participant A)

While the groups were a positive source of support for some, others felt that they could become a pit of negativity with single parents all moaning about their ex-partners and not talking about more constructive topics. The role of the support group co-ordinator was seen as pivotal in creating the right atmosphere for a group. If the co-ordinator knows what they're doing, is well supported by Gingerbread and has the time and energy to give to a group then parents feel it can work really well. However, because that isn't always the case, the groups can be inconsistent. Some parents suggested that to make the groups more effective, Gingerbread should help to support the group co-ordinators more both to run the groups effectively by providing support around areas like venue hire and fundraising and to advertise the groups in the local area as attendance at groups could sometimes be very low. It was also thought that more could be made of the groups to help deliver other services for parents, for example they could be used as hubs from which single parents could be signposted to other local services.

Gingerbread website, forums and newsletter

The website was used by parents as an ongoing source of support and in many cases was the first port of call for parents who had questions about single parenting. It was praised for being a comprehensive source of information with a wide range of advice in one place. Parents described it as reader-friendly, clear and relevant. Specific advice that parents had sought from the website included advice on benefits, use of the benefits calculator to work out their financial position, help setting up a parental agreement, advice on divorce and information about single parent holidays. However, it was also used as a general source of information, to keep parents updated and help them feel connected to the single parent community.

“I do sort of pop on there every now and again, like just to kind of look if anything's on there, any up to date information, anything that interests me.” (Participant A)

There was some criticism that the information on the website wasn't that in depth although also an acknowledgement that it could only provide very generic advice since parents' needs were likely to be very disparate and specific.

The forums were used less than the website by parents we spoke to. Those that had interacted with them had mixed views. One group felt it was potentially a useful way to get answers to specific questions and to interact with other single parents in a similar position.

“A good idea but I probably won't explore it more fully until I had a problem and wanted to find how other people had dealt with it” (Participant F)

However, others felt that the forums could be quite hit and miss, and pointed to instances of posting and then not receiving a reply. One parent also spoke about seeing some difficult posts from parents who were really desperate and feeling as though the forum was an inadequate medium for offering support and that reading about people's experiences in that way was “a bit harrowing really” (Participant P)

The regular Gingerbread newsletter that is sent out to the organisation's members was seen as very positive by participants who looked forward to reading it and found it interesting and informative. Some enjoyed the specific advice that it provided, others searched it for the discount vouchers that it sometimes included. The fact that it was regular was appreciated and even those who didn't read it regularly liked receiving it and there were no negative comments about the newsletter.

Learning, skills and employment activity

The qualitative work was designed to ensure that the sample included single parents who had attended a Gingerbread Learning, Skills and Employment (LSE) programme. Those that had were largely positive about the programmes and identified a range of personal outcomes. These included increased confidence both about work and about being a single parent, an enhanced network, new friendships, new skills and a better chance of getting a job. Parents also spoke about the programmes as being a chance for them to do something for themselves outside of parenting and to mix with other people who understood their position and didn't judge them. The attentiveness, persistence and empathetic approach of the programme advisers was also praised.

“It's a great way to network with other people. You don't feel judged. You don't feel pressured. You just feel accepted. It's someone else to talk to. Even though there's the course tutor, they hadn't been through the situation themselves, they were still very empathetic to it. They didn't look down their nose or think, well, I'm better than you...they were really, really warming and welcoming and very, very kind and helpful.” (Participant L)

Although no one in the sample got a job directly through Gingerbread, when asked about where they thought they would have been without the programme, some felt that it had been instrumental in helping them to find employment either through practical support such as CV enhancement or because it helped to boost their confidence or encouraged them to consider options they otherwise would not have. In one example, a single mother spoke about how one of the courses she had attended hadn't actually been that useful since it was too basic but was glad that she had attended anyway since it gave her a nudge to do something rather than sitting at home feeling despondent.

“It just shows that even though you're a single mum, you still can do things in life” (Participant Q)

Participants were very grateful to Gingerbread for giving them a place on one of the programmes so were generally reluctant to say anything more constructive. When asked what could have improved, parents spoke about wanting the programme sessions to run more frequently as they found it valuable. However, when probed, there was also some feedback about the communication following the programmes being inconsistent, with some saying that they didn't hear from Gingerbread in the months afterwards, and while this may not have been a planned part of the programme, they would have valued follow-up contact. In one case a participant was promised two sets of vouchers following the programme and only ever received one. One parent who had been on the Marks and Spencer programme also felt that the programme itself was a

little disorganised in parts and that the way they were trained by the retailer could have been more efficient.

Parents who hadn't been on an LSE programme but were aware of them had mixed views about their value, some thought they looked useful while others felt that they were too basic and didn't accommodate single parents who were already trained in something but struggling to find work that fitted around parenting.

Policy and campaigning activity

Gingerbread's campaigning work was seen as important and unique. Parents were not always clear exactly which issues Gingerbread focused on but they were grateful that Gingerbread was fighting their corner, trying to make things better for single parents and give them a voice. Engagement with Gingerbread's campaigning activity was unsurprisingly mixed; some parents had actively got involved by writing to a Member of Parliament or similar while others had no interest in getting involved despite being very supportive of what Gingerbread was doing in that area.

Parents who did know about the specifics of Gingerbread's campaigning activities mentioned the importance of its work on Universal Credit, making ticket pricing fair for activities and holidays for single parents, and having a year's leeway to pay certain debts. Specific campaigning for the rights of single dads was also seen as an important strand of activity. The importance of Gingerbread's campaigning work was stressed by parents who felt that no one else was operating in the same space and that campaigning was the only way that things could possibly change for single parents in the long-term.

Those who were critical of Gingerbread's campaigning work thought that the organisation wasn't making enough noise or pushing hard enough for single parents.

“I think it should be leaping up and down about the plight of single parents in the UK” (Participant G)

As well as pushing harder with the campaigning work, parents thought that Gingerbread would benefit from being more defined in its communications and in the policy areas that it targets. Some parents felt that the language Gingerbread used around single parents could sometimes be a bit 'vacuous' and that a more targeted focus in the campaigning work using more specific and defined language would be beneficial and enable the organisation to get its messages across more clearly.

3.4 Overarching views of Gingerbread

What parents valued about Gingerbread

Just as single parents are motivated to contact Gingerbread for different reasons and at different stages of their lives, the value that they experience from Gingerbread is also specific to their situation. The difference that Gingerbread makes to individual parents' lives is understandably linked to their needs, expectations and their motivation for contacting them in the first place. However, overall what single parents identify as valuable about Gingerbread can be split into three distinct categories:

It recognises and supports single parents

Discussion about the loneliness and stigma associated with single parenting was prevalent across the qualitative interviews. Parents spoke about how it was hard for other people to understand what they were going through, and in some cases, they felt judged by peers or other organisations they had contact with. Gingerbread was valued because it was seen as recognising the challenges that single parents can face and therefore helping them feel as though they were not alone and that their struggles and issues were normal. Through its various activities, Gingerbread was seen as portraying single parenting in a positive light and helping to counteract the stigma that parents experienced or felt.

“They give a really positive vibe about single parents. You can feel like quite a bit of shame, I think, whereas when you're contacting Gingerbread or you're on the website or anything, you don't get that which is really positive” (Participant B)

There was also a sense that while other agencies engaged with single parents' circumstances, Gingerbread engaged with parents as individuals. One parent gave the example of feeling as though the jobcentre was pushing her away and telling her to get a job without understanding her specific situation while Gingerbread did the opposite and looked at her as a person and was keen to help her to identify what she was capable of. The respect that Gingerbread shows single parents was also spoken about in relation to the communication that it delivers. Parents mentioned valuing the fact that Gingerbread stays in regular contact through the newsletter and when supporting a parent on a specific issue will try and ensure that parents are not just palmed off to other agencies but handed over with consideration.

Although some single parents are relying on Gingerbread's recognition and support to help them get through a difficult stage or manage a specific issue, others are simply grateful for its existence. They may not be actively engaging with Gingerbread but they still find value in Gingerbread's existence and like knowing that it is there, advocating for single parents' rights and acting on their behalf.

“There's lots of charities that are helping people that are in dire need, but Gingerbread is probably the only real voice that's actually putting it forward from the perspective of single parents.” (Participant O)

It provides single-parent focussed advice and information

The value of the advice and information that Gingerbread provides was apparent across the qualitative interviews. Parents may not necessarily be getting all the information they need from Gingerbread, though some undoubtedly do, but they value the fact that Gingerbread can advise on single-parent specific issues. Specific information that was highlighted as being useful included details about benefits, the benefits calculator, advice on housing, finance, and information about cheaper holidays for single parent families.

“If people are unsure of their rights or financial issues or anything that they're struggling with, being a single parent, I just think that Gingerbread's probably the most qualified, but also experienced people to go to to ask. Because I know a lot of people recommend going to the CAB and things and like that, but when you've got something that's specifically set up for single parents, I think it's definitely worth using.” (Participant B)

Those that valued Gingerbread's information spoke about the advantages of it being easily accessible and all in one place. In some cases, the process of getting advice was credited as much as the advice itself. Parents spoke about feeling listened to and less alone as a result of seeking advice through the helpline or website.

“The way that they cover lots of different areas of advice as well. The advice that I have looked at myself has been very helpful, very informative.” (Participant C)

It helps develop confidence and networks

Gingerbread was seen as being a gateway to reaching other single parents and this was hugely valued by parents who wanted to connect. The theme of isolation among single parents was strong in the interviews and it was felt by some that when Gingerbread worked well, it was successfully putting parents in touch with each other either through support groups or LSE based groups. Contacts that were made through Gingerbread helped to enhance single parent peer support and to expand parents' networks.

Some parents also credited Gingerbread with having enhanced their confidence and strength. In some cases, this was a by-product of having made connections with other single parents, in others it was because they had taken part in a programme or received some advice and now felt more confident about their own skills and situation or the options open to them. While attending a Learning Skills and Employment programme had ultimately helped some parents to secure a job, even those who hadn't moved on to employment were positive about the confidence, skills or renewed focus that the programme had given them.

“I think Gingerbread has boosted my confidence and it's helped me learn what's right and what's wrong with a job application, what to say, how to sell yourself to someone.” (Participant K)

For some single parents, getting in touch with Gingerbread to meet other parents or take part in a programme represented the first thing they had really done for themselves since becoming a single parent and they were grateful for the connection to the wider world and renewed sense of self that this gave them.

“Just the empowerment side to it as well. Building relationships, hearing about other people's stories, their journeys, what they've been through and just seeing how much raw talent there was in that one room.” (Participant S)

What Gingerbread could do better

When single parents were asked what they thought of Gingerbread, there were mixed responses, while some had nothing but praise for Gingerbread, others flagged frustrations or difficult experiences relating to the organisation. All participants were probed around what they thought Gingerbread could do better and even some of the more positive parents were able to come up with some ideas. These fell into three areas:

Increased advertising and promotion

There was a very strong sense among single parents that Gingerbread is not well known enough and that it should be doing more to promote both its existence and its activities. It was a common theme for parents to feel as though they had stumbled across Gingerbread through luck because no one they encountered in other organisations or public services had ever mentioned Gingerbread and some wished that they had come across it sooner.

Suggestions for how Gingerbread could promote itself more centred around increased advertising in places that single parents might visit. This included schools, libraries, doctor's surgeries and children's centres. It was also felt that informing other organisations and public services about Gingerbread would help to get the word out to single parents. Parents also asked for Gingerbread to have more of a social media presence and to cross-advertise their communication channels. Some hadn't realised that Gingerbread were already on social media and thought that the organisation should have made that more explicit.

“I think they should publish themselves a bit better because obviously, I'd never heard of them until the Jobcentre. I've never seen a leaflet anywhere.”

I've never seen an advertisement on Facebook or anything like that. So, I wouldn't have known about them unless the Jobcentre had told me about them." (Participant K)

There were also some suggestions about the messages that Gingerbread should be using to advertise itself. Some parents felt that Gingerbread should make it clearer that it was there for both single mums and dads as there was a sense that some of the language it used in its communications could make it seem more mum-centric.

"The look and feel of things about Gingerbread, still make me feel as though as a single dad, this isn't quite for me." (Participant V)

And it was felt by some single parents that the messages Gingerbread sends out about single parents could be more specific and targeted. While being positive about single parents and aiming to paint them in a good light was seen as valuable there was one view that this could also be slightly unhelpful as it wasn't specific enough and didn't acknowledge the disparity that exists within the single parent population.

Greater clarity about what it does

There was some confusion about exactly what Gingerbread could and could not offer to single parents and so alongside promoting itself more, there were calls for Gingerbread to be more explicit about its remit. Parents may have heard of one or two of Gingerbread's services but that did not mean they knew about the others and some knew almost nothing about what Gingerbread did beyond existing for single parents. Even those who were familiar with Gingerbread's services were not necessarily clear about the focus or limits of the organisation's expertise. Parents said they would like to know more about what specifically Gingerbread could or could not help them with. While parents did not necessarily expect Gingerbread to cover all bases and be all things to all single parents, they indicated that more clarity about where Gingerbread stopped and another service started would be welcomed.

"It's not really clear what support I would get if I went to Gingerbread as a single parent now, where I am." (Participant N)

This view was also voiced in relation to Gingerbread's campaigning activity, parents were aware that campaigning was going on and while some (including those who read the newsletter) had an idea of what campaigning activity focused on, others wanted to know more about its specific focus and progress.

Stronger partnerships

The qualitative data suggests that single parents aren't necessarily expecting Gingerbread to be able to provide everything they need and they don't expect Gingerbread to be operating in isolation. The recognition and positive narrative about single parenting that Gingerbread delivers means that for some parents it is the most comfortable or natural first port of call, but they don't necessarily see it as their last. Parents felt that Gingerbread could do more to strengthen their partnerships with other organisations and this was seen as having multiple potential benefits. First, Gingerbread would be able to refer single parents to other services more confidently; second, they may be able to pass on discounts or offers from other organisations; third, working in partnership was identified as a way for Gingerbread to increase parents' and other providers' awareness of who they are and what they do; and finally, partnership working would help single parents to be referred to Gingerbread from other agencies.

There were examples in the interviews of Gingerbread's partnerships working well, which included single parents being referred to Gingerbread from a hostel or a Jobcentre Plus, however there was a sense that these sorts of referrals aren't consistent.

"Why when I left the refuge was I not given a pamphlet saying, 'This is Gingerbread. They are the charity for single parents. It would be worth giving them a call if I have a query.' I've never seen that overlap if that makes sense." (Participant J)

3.5 Views on Gingerbread's future focus

Single parents were asked to reflect on where Gingerbread should focus its future activities. Five key areas of activity were identified in the interviews. And while some of these strongly align with Gingerbread's current focus, others represent new areas of activity.

More work on Mental health and emotional support

Single parents of all backgrounds spoke about their need for more mental health and emotional support and their desire for this to be at least partly delivered by Gingerbread. The need for these types of support was driven both by specific difficult experiences such as domestic violence or having been in an abusive relationship of some sort and by the more general experiences of single parents who either just needed a friendly voice of encouragement or felt isolated and were struggling with the weight of parenting on their shoulders.

“A lot of mums are very depressed and have anxiety problems, which is one of the problems of why they don't go out and get jobs or do courses, because they don't feel like they can or should.” (Participant Q)

While parents used the terms 'well-being', 'mental health' and 'emotional support' fairly interchangeably there was a distinction in the data between those parents who wanted access to formal mental health services and those who were seeking broader emotional support. The types of formal mental health services that parents mentioned included counselling and other types of talking therapy both face to face and by telephone. Parents didn't necessarily think that Gingerbread should be providing these sorts of mental health services themselves but there were suggestions that Gingerbread could partner with another organisation to deliver that sort of service. In some cases, single parents knew that they could visit their GP and be referred to a counsellor but they were reluctant to do that. The desire to seek a mental health service through Gingerbread is perhaps linked to the perception of Gingerbread as being positive, understanding and supportive towards single parents and therefore more approachable.

While parents did not necessarily expect Gingerbread to deliver formal mental health services itself, there was an appetite for Gingerbread to deliver more emotional support to single parents. Some of the ways that were suggested for this included enhancing existing services so that they were more caring and nurturing and acknowledged parent's emotional support needs. This might not mean changing the services themselves but simply delivering them with an emotionally-conscious and supportive tone that recognises the emotional support that parents might need to get through a specific moment such as legal negotiations or securing housing. Peer support was seen as a helpful form of emotional support by some single parents since it gave them the chance to vent their issues and to have their experiences validated by someone who had also been through them. For this reason, it was also suggested that Gingerbread could offer a buddying scheme where single parents are trained to provide support to each other, and for some single parents having access to a wider network of parents through a support group was a good start to help them improve their emotional well-being.

There was a clear theme in the qualitative interviews that mental health and emotional support is the missing part of the jigsaw for many single parents. They value the practical help and advice that Gingerbread and other agencies provide but feel as though there is currently nowhere to go that really acknowledges and supports the emotional difficulties that single parents encounter and which can be a large barrier to them moving towards becoming stable or, ultimately, thriving.

Continue campaigning and advocacy work

While the practical advice and support that Gingerbread provides was seen as being hugely valuable by parents, there was also a view that Gingerbread has a key role in creating more systemic change for parents and helping them in the long-term. Campaigning and advocacy work were mentioned spontaneously by single parents throughout the qualitative interviews as being a key component to Gingerbread's work. A continued focus on

campaigning and shifting policy was seen as vital for Gingerbread's future focus since no one else is currently operating in this space and advocating for single parents at a national level.

“There's lots of people at the moment saying Universal Credit is rubbish and the government are doing this, that and the other, but Gingerbread is the only voice that's saying it from the single parent's point of view.” (Participant O)

It was suggested that campaigning work is what sets Gingerbread apart from other charities and services, and that without that underpinning its work, its activities would be diluted and less beneficial.

This was another area where strengthened partnerships were seen as being beneficial and parents spoke about the potential for Gingerbread to increase its presence by partnering with other organisations to campaign on specific issues.

When parents spoke about campaigning and policy work, some had very specific ideas about the areas that Gingerbread should tackle which included Universal Credit, domestic violence and child safety, poverty, the closure of Sure Start centres and single parent tariffs for holidays. Others were less clear about where Gingerbread should be focusing but felt that having the organisation campaign for single parent rights in general was hugely beneficial.

Making support groups more available, stable and effective

Gingerbread's support groups were seen as an essential component of the organisation's work but their patchy availability and inconsistent quality was considered to be problematic and worthy of more attention. Improving the support groups coverage and quality would potentially fill a large gap for single parents. When the groups are well run they not only offer parents and their children access to a network of other single parent families but they can deliver a peer model of emotional support that helps to tackle some of the loneliness and stigma that can be so prevalent among single parents.

“(Without the support group), I wouldn't have that network of support and friends. I wouldn't have had the experiences I've had”. (Participant D)

However, currently having access to a well-run support group is a lottery for single parents. Participants suggested that Gingerbread could do more to support volunteers centrally, by training them, helping them to find venues and promoting the groups that do exist a little better. There was also real appetite for extending the support groups to new areas and those who couldn't access a support group where they lived expressed disappointment.

“Extend the support groups, if they're in more areas, that would be really helpful, because I know that I definitely would have attended one if it was in my area because I think it's really important to have contact with people who are in a similar situation to yourself.” (Participant B)

Continued advice and signposting

The advice and information that Gingerbread provides was one of the most valued elements of its offer and parents felt it should remain a key focus in the future. Although the advice that Gingerbread provides was seen as useful and valuable, it was also recognised that Gingerbread cannot necessarily be expert in all the areas that single parents may want to know about and so the importance of signposting was also emphasised. This tied in strongly with the perceived need for Gingerbread to have stronger partnerships and it was felt that nurturing partnerships so that parents could be effectively passed over to the correct organisation when Gingerbread could not help directly would be very beneficial.

When probed on the type of advice that Gingerbread should be providing or signposting to, parents spoke about a range of areas many of which Gingerbread already covers including legal advice, housing rights, money management advice and disability rights for single parents.

Helping parents to realise their potential

Parents who had been on a Learning Skills and Employment programme really valued the opportunity that it gave them to focus on themselves and to think about their future direction. While none of the parents in the sample had acquired a job directly through Gingerbread, the skills that they learnt on the courses and the confidence it gave them were valued. There was a view that helping parents to explore their options and to realise their potential was important in its own right. Participants were not clear on what this offer should look like. In some cases, the value of LSE programmes was emphasised, in others it was about Gingerbread being an organisation that really listens to and values single parents since this helped to increase parents' sense of self-worth and purpose. Practical suggestions included more training and education focused on getting back to work for all parents including those who are more educated, and a database of parent-friendly flexible jobs. It is worth acknowledging here that, at the time of writing, Gingerbread is in the process of closing down its Learning Skills and Employment activity and will no longer be delivering face-to-face provision in this area. This research suggests that this will leave a gap for single parents since the LSE programmes were valued by those who attended them. However, it may be possible for at least some of skills and confidence that parents have valued from these programmes to be delivered through some of Gingerbread's other services such as support groups and the helpline.

Which single parents Gingerbread should be targeting

Participants were asked which types of single parents Gingerbread should be focussing on when designing and promoting its services; those who had more immediate short-term needs and who are more likely to be at the striving end of the continuum or those who are more stable who need longer-term support. This question was asked because Gingerbread wanted to understand more about where parents felt the greatest need was and which groups of parents it should be targeting its services at.

Unsurprisingly, views on this were very mixed and the question was also interpreted in two different ways. Some parents focused on the striving to thriving distinction, while others focused on how long a parent had been single for. This generated a range of answers and each stage of single parents' journeys were identified as important to focus on by different groups of participants. Some felt that that Gingerbread should be there to support parents who are early on in their single parent journey and who need more immediate support in getting key elements of their lives on track. They felt that Gingerbread should help parents through the shock of the early days with the practical issues as well as with emotional and mental health support. However, others felt that the focus should be more on those who are more stable but who need some support to help them to thrive instead of those who are struggling. Single parents who supported this view felt that it can be very hard for parents who are doing fine but then hit a wall of some kind and fall backwards. Likewise, it was pointed out that a parent can be struggling but viewed as managing by the system and therefore under the required thresholds for benefits or services. This group felt that Gingerbread should be there to champion these parents and help them to get to where they want to be in the long-term.

“I actually think that there needs to be somebody looking at trying to improve lives for people as a long-term measure, because there are lots of people trying to improve people's lives in a short-term measure” (Participant O)

And there were parents who felt that Gingerbread should be there for everyone whether a recent single parent or long-term one, whether striving or nearer thriving:

“Most definitely they should be there at the beginning to know that people are not alone and there are people there to help them. Definitely towards the middle where they're starting to get settled. Maybe not so much towards the thriving because then they've been on their own, but not lose contact...” (Participant L)

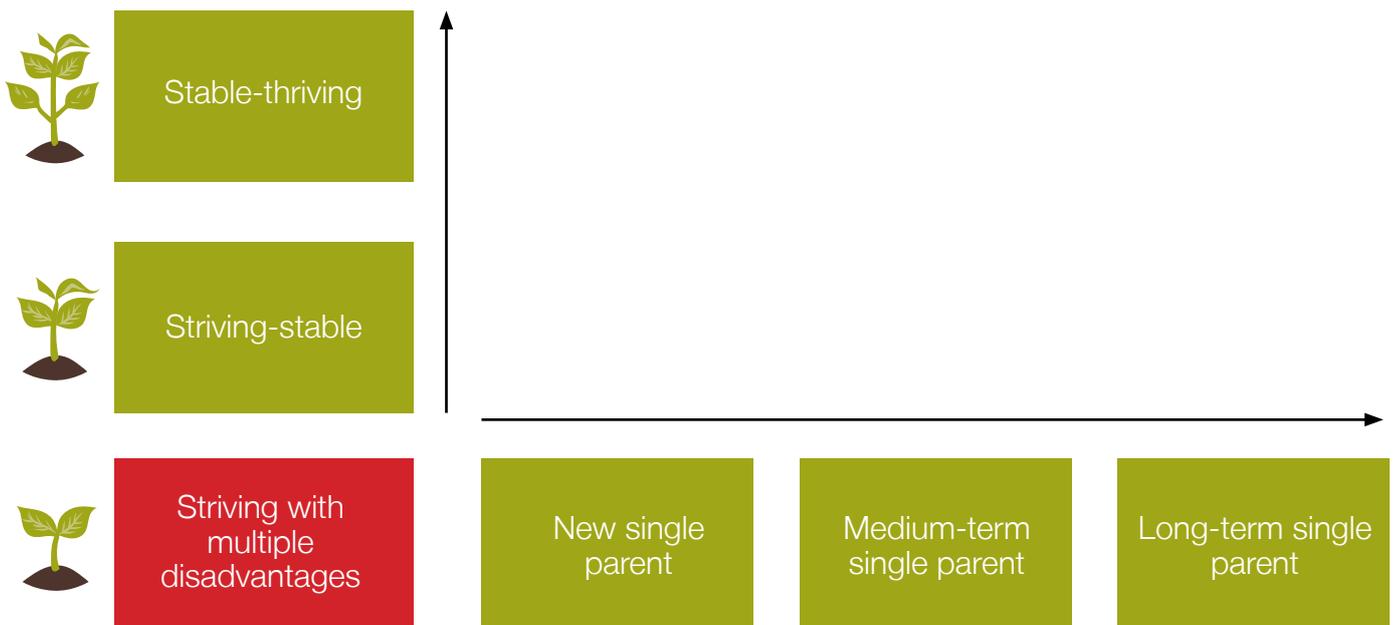
Despite the disagreement on where Gingerbread should focus its efforts, there was broad consensus that Gingerbread should not be targeting single parents who are really struggling, suffering multiple disadvantage and for whom being a single parent is just one of many issues that they need to tackle. The suggestion was not that Gingerbread should not help these parents, more that Gingerbread should not target them for support. It was felt that there are other agencies who are better set up to help support these parents and provide expert

guidance.

“There are lots of people out there trying to support people at the surviving end and those people have always existed in society and they’re always going to continue to exist in society.....There’s always somebody trying to do that end of the thing and some will do it badly, some will do it well. If Gingerbread was to put all its energy into that, that would be great but I think they’d be duplicating what some other organisations are doing and I think it would just unravel itself because it would be bottomless. It would be bottomless. It sounds awful but I just know how stretched everybody is.” (Participant O)

It was also clear from the interviews that for those parents who are suffering multiple disadvantage then being a single parent is just one of a long list of worries and potentially quite far down the list if fundamental issues like not having a home or any sort of income have not been addressed. In these instances, while Gingerbread’s help is likely to be welcome it is also not the most obvious first port of call. Diagram 3, below represents the participants’ views on who Gingerbread should be focused on. Whichever groups of single parents Gingerbread decides to target, there was a very clear steer that it should focus both on more practical types of support and on emotional support no matter what stage they are at.

Diagram 4: Who single parents think Gingerbread should focus on



How services should be delivered

Parents were asked to consider which modes should be used to deliver specific services and parents’ responses to this fell into two groups. The first group had high expectations of Gingerbread and felt that delivery should be tailored to the specific service and to single parents’ needs. While this group saw a place for telephone and online services and valued both the helpline and website, they emphasised the importance of face-to-face delivery since they felt that was the most accessible and inclusive approach.

“There’s nothing that can replace people being there and talking to someone. I think phone is ridiculously over-relied on and it just alienates people when they try more than once to get through and they can’t get through and they think this is useless and give up.” (Participant G)

Other suggestions in this group including the delivery of services though specific advisors, buddies or key

workers who could get to know individual parents and their needs and follow-up on individual issues so that parents had someone holding their hand while exploring a specific problem.

The second group had more realistic expectations of Gingerbread and acknowledged that while face-to-face services would be desirable in some cases, they were expensive to run and therefore not always possible so telephone, including the helpline, and online may be more realistic options.

The diverse response to this question shows firstly just how important it is for Gingerbread to be clear with single parents about what it can and cannot offer and why, and secondly underlines the need for there to be more of a face-to-face presence through the strengthening and expansion of support groups. It may not be possible for Gingerbread to deliver large numbers of services face-to-face itself but the appetite for both strengthened partnerships and an enhanced support group network shows that there may be other ways of helping to meet single parent needs.

Section 4: Conclusions and implications

It is clear that Gingerbread is valued, appreciated and seen as essential by single parents. It is meeting many single parents' needs and already helping them to move further along their journey to enable them to become more stable and ultimately, thrive. However, there are indications from this data that there are also clear areas of improvement that might enable Gingerbread to have greater reach while operating more efficiently.

We need to build effective partnerships to maximise the impact for single parent families

At present, the organisation's partnerships are not strong enough and this is a missed opportunity since forging specific and well-managed partnerships with a range of organisations operating in adjacent areas would have multiple benefits both for Gingerbread and the single parents it serves. It would allow Gingerbread to remain as a trusted first port of call and expert on single parent-specific issues while ensuring that parents were able to receive expert help in areas outside of its remit including mental health support. Forming an effective network of partnerships would also naturally assist with enhancing advertising and promotion which is currently regarded by parents as being insufficient and inconsistent.

We need to strengthen our support groups through volunteer training and management

Gingerbread's support groups are popular and important and with the closure of its LSE programme they also become the primary mechanism for Gingerbread to deliver face-to-face services. Gingerbread should consider investing in a programme of volunteer training and management to help encourage single parents to take on the role of local-co-ordinator and to give them the skills to deliver this in an effective and consistent way. Effective volunteer training could also open up the support groups to deliver beyond their current model. Groups could become a hub for employment and skills activities with a focus on nurturing parents' confidence and exposing them to new ideas and opportunities. Emotional health is a pervasive theme in this research and increasing the number and quality of local support groups could present part of the solution to developing Gingerbread's offer in this area. As the support groups strengthen there may be the potential for more formal emotional support activities to be rolled out in the form of a buddying scheme or similar which could again be delivered through a central programme of volunteer training and management.

We need to be clear about Gingerbread's current offer for single parent families

Parents' views that Gingerbread should be clearer about what it does and promote that more effectively need to be heard and acted upon. The Change Framework provides Gingerbread with greater clarity about how its services, impact and business model link together. Our focus now must be communicating these changes to single parents. This research suggests that ultimately parents expect Gingerbread to be targeting its services to all but the most disadvantaged parents who might be better supported elsewhere. This may be possible to deliver with an enhanced partnership and support group model but Gingerbread needs to take time to clearly define where its offer starts and ends and how its partners will effectively pick up where it leaves off. This is not an easy task but doing it well will pay dividends since a clearer narrative will not only ring true with parents but with potential partners and funders who will be better able to navigate their relationship with the organisation.

We must continue to campaign for single parents to be valued

Perhaps one of the most surprising elements of this research was the extent of single parents' support for Gingerbread's campaigning and policy activities. This is seen as fundamental to the organisation not least because the activities are unique to Gingerbread. Having a greater clarity of purpose will help Gingerbread to deliver its campaigning activity in a more targeted way and communicate this more effectively to parents who although not always interested in taking part themselves, are grateful that it is happening and want to see it continue in the long-term. A stronger partnership model will also ultimately help with Gingerbread's strategic vision of single parent families feeling valued. By closely working with other agencies, Gingerbread

can support these agencies in understanding issues through the lens of a single parent family and use this understanding to help build momentum for its campaigning work.

We must embed our learning from developing our change framework

The read across between the research and the framework is clear. The framework acknowledges the importance of Gingerbread's advice and its campaigning work and responds to the call for strengthened partnerships and an enhanced support group model. The insight that this research has given us into single parents' journeys and aspirations for the future has also helped to define the short-term impacts that Gingerbread will look for to help measure its success.

Gingerbread plans to continue to draw on the evidence to help it refine the framework and specify what it will mean for the organisation. Having a well evidenced theory of change for the organisation will undoubtedly reduce risk and help increase Gingerbread's chances of achieving the impacts it seeks.

We must measure our impact

Gingerbread will seek to generate new evidence to evaluate its success against this framework and ensure that all its activities remain firmly linked to single parents' needs.

To deliver our new strategy and achieve the impact outlined in our Change Framework, we are calling on

- **Charity and voluntary organisations** who reach single parents to help us build partnerships which will allow us to co-deliver a comprehensive journey for single parent families to enable them to become more stable and ultimately, thrive
- **Funders and supporters** to help us respond to the challenges identified through the research by investing in solutions which allow us to operate more effectively
- **Social sector leaders and evaluation practitioners** to ensure we continue our learning journey sharing on best practice, emerging evidence, and maximise opportunities to collaborate.

Appendix

Full details of other phases of the research are in the full technical appendices report available here on our website [\[insert hyperlink\]](#).

Gingerbread

Single parents, equal families

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'Gingerbread, the charity for single parent families' is registered in England and Wales as a company limited by guarantee, no. 402748, and a registered charity, no. 230750