



Helpline evaluation

Qualitative review

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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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Executive summary

The Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline answers around 9,000 calls a year, providing expert and personalised advice and information on the range of issues affecting single parents. This includes benefits, tax credits, and family law. The service aims to deliver the following four key outcomes:

- Single parents will report having increased resilience and being better able to cope
- Single parents will report feeling better informed
- Single parents will report improved financial well-being
- Single parents will report decreased levels of isolation after using the service

At the start of 2018, our annual helpline impact report surveys helpline callers about their experiences, to give us some top-line statistics about the service. We have conducted 13 depth interviews with Helpline users to help us better understand the experience and impact of the service for single parents, and to test these outcomes. This qualitative evaluation builds on the quantitative annual survey that we conduct every year.

Key conclusions and learning

Single parents' experience of the Helpline

We gained an in-depth understanding of how, why, and when people use the Helpline.

- Most participants found the Helpline through an internet search for single parent advice or from family and friends – by accident or chance. There is a notable absence from other organisations referrals, in comparison to the findings of the Helpline survey, suggesting an area for improvement
- Two thirds of participants had used the website before calling. They called the Helpline despite using the website to get specific answers, reassurance, and explanations of complex information
- Participants called to discuss the range of issues that affect single parents and calls often covered multiple topics. The first call to the Helpline was usually the longest, and covered the widest range of topics. Additional calls were shorter and more specific
- Advisors were seen as supportive and non-judgemental, and the call was a “psychological boost”, with some participants adding that they felt less alone after the call
- The advice given was clear, comprehensive, and not rushed

The importance of speaking to someone

Our annual survey demonstrates that Helpline users identify being able to speak to someone as an important reason why they use the service.ⁱ We wanted to understand more about the importance of this and to investigate exactly what benefits users felt they gained from speaking to someone. The answers that participants gave us were; the emotional support and understanding that they receive from advisors; reassurance and clarification on the information they already had; information tailored to their situation; it is easy to express themselves; the ability to ask follow-up questions; and having all the information in one place. Speaking to someone provides unique and irreplaceable benefits for some people, such as those with complex issues or who are feeling overwhelmed or emotionally fragile.

Holistic support and advice

Participants might have called for advice on one issue, but very often they got advice on far more than that.

Single parents face a complex interplay of challenges, and this research found that while they may call to discuss for example housing, they will often end up also discussing benefits, child maintenance, or family law. At times, these were topics or issues that they hadn't thought of or known about. An additional benefit of speaking to someone was the ability for advisors to probe and direct these conversations so callers got the comprehensive information they needed.

'One big call'

We identified a pattern of the Helpline delivering 'one big call'. This is a long and comprehensive call, made at a time of separation or change, when callers are worried and overwhelmed, with lots of questions about a range of issues that now affect them. Often emotionally vulnerable, they benefit from getting specific advice all in one place and a human touch from speaking to someone. Having this call helps single parents to cope by identifying their next steps, and in some cases has long-term impacts, including securing the support needed to stabilise their families. The Helpline helps layout the key support and information needed to navigate the challenges, and sets callers on their path as single parents.

The Helpline and Gingerbread

We investigated the linkages made between the Helpline and other Gingerbread services. It was clear that good connections existed between the Helpline and the website; most participants now regularly use the information section of the website to self-serve. However, analysis of the research showed that more could be done to connect the users with other Gingerbread services, such as the forum or peer support groups, which could support users in additional ways as they move through their single parent journeys. In particular, this linkage could provide emotional support and reduce social isolation; something that participants told us was a key feature of being a single parent, but that the Helpline is not designed to tackle.

Opening hours and waiting times

The reoccurring suggestion for improvement concerned extending opening hours, particularly in the evenings when working parents are able to call, and decreasing waiting times. Steps have already been taken to improve this including late opening one evening per week. Further research could identify which hours single parents would prefer, with a view to adapting the service within budgetary limitations.

Impact and revised outcomes

We looked at the impact of the Helpline on callers and found that while there were clear effects, the outcomes that we currently aim to deliver were not entirely accurate descriptions of these effects.

We found that single parents did report having improved emotions but they focused on the themes of confidence to take decisions and the utility of designing a plan with advisors. Parents also felt more informed, but specifically the Helpline gives callers an awareness of the statutory and support landscape for single parents, allowing them to make informed decisions. The fiscal and policy climate limits the ability of the Helpline to actually improve parents' financial well-being. However, it can, and does, advise callers about their best options in this context, helping them to maximise their income. Finally, we identified that single parents experience social isolation on a deeper level than a Helpline could respond to. However, the emotional support and human touch gained from speaking to someone was beneficial and had a real impact.

Therefore, this evaluation recommends revising the outcomes to the following:

- Single parents increase confidence to address challenges they face and have practical plan to take action
- Single parents improve awareness of their rights and options e.g. contact, maintenance, benefits
- Single parents improve financial understanding on how to maximise their income
- Single parents receive reassurance and connection in a period of change/crisis

Introduction

This report summarises the learning from the evaluation of the Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline. The Helpline is part of Gingerbread's advice and information service, and provides free and confidential support and advice on the range of issues affecting single parents. This evaluation builds upon the findings from the annual helpline impact survey and provides a unique opportunity to capture a range of experiences, unpacking the participants' responses in detail and depth, as well as extending the research to better understand the wider impact of a Helpline call.

The Helpline

The Helpline answers around 9,000 calls a year, and the most common topics discussed are benefits and tax credits, family law, child maintenance, and housing. The Helpline offers specialist advice from experienced advisors, complex personalised benefit calculations and sign-posting to a range of local and national organisations. It is open daytime Monday-Friday, with later opening on Monday and Wednesday. 75% of calls received are from single mothers, 4% from single fathers, and a small number are family and friends, parents planning a separation, and non-resident or shared care fathers.

The service is funded to deliver the following four key outcomes:

- Single parents will report feeling better informed
- Single parents will report having increased resilience and being better able to cope
- Single parents will report improved financial well-being
- Single parents will report decreased levels of isolation after using the service

Methodology

Interviews

This evaluation was conducted by a Project Oracle research placement, with support from Gingerbread's Head of Evaluation and Learning. Research was conducted through qualitative interviews with service users, a methodology chosen for its ability to capture rich, descriptive data and a range of experiences, and then to 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 study such as a survey). Through July and August 2018, 13 depth interviews were held with Helpline users, who were asked about finding the Helpline, their experience, the wider impact of the call, and about their support network. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded with participant's permission and then transcribed. Participants were recruited in the first instance from those who had expressed an interest in participating in further research after completing the 2017 Helpline survey. Further recruitment was then conducted via the members' newsletter.

Sampling

Qualitative research's ability to capture a broad range of experiences depends upon hearing from single parents with a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. To this end, a pre-determined purposive sample was designed. Table 1 provides a summary of the sampling approach. The sample was ambitious and with a couple of exceptions, achieved or exceeded. 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. Hence, while we planned to interview 25 single parents, we decided to close field work after 13 interviews as the saturation point was reached. 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 individual experience varies.

Table 1: Sampling approach for qualitative review

Characteristic	Quota n=25	Adapted for n=13 quota	Who we spoke to
Gender	3 single fathers	1-2 single fathers	1 male family member
Age of parent	Monitor	Monitor	6 parents aged 35-44, 2 parents in 25-34 and 45-59, and 1 in 19-24 and 60+.
Ethnicity of parent	4 BME, monitor for specific	2 BME, monitor for specific	8 White British. 1 in each of the following categories; White Other, Asian Indian, Asian Pakistani, Black Caribbean, and Mixed White and Black Caribbean.
Employment status	2 unemployed, 2 full-time employed, 2 part-time employment	1 unemployed, 1 full-time employment, 1 part-time employment	1 in full time employment, 2 in part-time employment, 1 self-employed, 2 not in employment education or training, 1 full time education, 1 part-time education, 1 full time carer, 1 other and 3 unemployed and looking for work.
Income	Monitor	Monitor	3 'not sure' and 2 'prefer not to say'. 3 earn £10,400-15,599, and 1 in each of the following categories; <£10,399, £15,600-£20,799, £26,000-£31,199, £31,200-£36,399.

Characteristic	Quota n=25	Adapted for n=13 quota	Who we spoke to
Disability	1 child, 1 parent	1 child, 1 parent	1 adult with long term (not a single parent), life limiting health condition. 2 children with autism.
Geographical area	5 in London, 1 in Wales, monitor for South, North, East and West	3 in London, 1 in Wales, monitor for North, South, East and West	3 in London, 4 in North West, 1 in each of the East and West Midlands, 3 in South East and 1 in South West
Age of youngest child	4 with youngest child under 5	2 with youngest child under 5	10 with youngest child under 5, and 3 with youngest child between 6-12
Life context at time of first helpline call	Monitor	Monitor	10 were at a point of change in their lives – 6 were in the process of separating (2 were returning to the UK after a period of time living abroad in the process), 2 were considering separating and 2 were considering leaving/not going back to work.

Ethics and Safeguarding

The evaluation was completed in accordance with ethical research best practice. Participants were given:

- Information about the project and their data rights prior to the interview and were required to give their written and verbal consent to participate. They were free to remove their consent at any time
- The opportunity to read the report before it was published, and those who were featured as case studies gave additional consent
- Aware that the research questions could cause some participants distress, a Safeguarding Plan was put in place, in line with Gingerbread's safeguarding policy. Participants were informed that if they disclosed a threat of harm to themselves or others, this policy would be followed
- After the interview, participants were given an information leaflet detailing other organisations who provide support and advice for issues affecting single parents

Limitations

- The absence of single parent father participants is a limitation of this research. The difficulty in recruiting male single parents was partly due to the fact that they are only 10% of single parents and 4% of Helpline callers. This is according to the standard definition of single parents as majority or sole carers of at least one dependent child, which the Helpline uses; it does not advise non-resident parents. Additional efforts were made to recruit single fathers, such as directly asking all single fathers who called the Helpline if they'd like to participate but with no success
- Because all the participants actively chose to participate, there is likely to be some bias towards those who had a positive experience, or those who prefer accessing support through a Helpline

Learning from methodology

The methodology of this evaluation yielded some important learning for further qualitative research.

- It was beneficial to have some time between the participant's use of the service and the interview, in order to allow time for reflection and for any impact to develop
- It is difficult to recruit single fathers to participate in research about single parents, due to the small population size
- Recruitment is better when focused on those who are the most appropriate participants; recruitment via the members' newsletter triggered a range of additional and unrelated responses

Single parent's experience of calling the Helpline

Journey to the Helpline

Four different journeys to the Helpline were reported in the research. The most common was via an internet search for separation advice or advice for single parents, as well as using terms relating to their specific query, for example 'housing'. Gingerbread's website appeared in the top few results for these searches. In these cases, participants were looking for general advice rather than a Helpline specifically. Other journeys were; previous knowledge about Gingerbread but not the Helpline; previous knowledge of the Helpline through work; and referred by friends and family.

This suggests that the Helpline is often discovered by accident or chance – no one reported that it had been advertised to them. For one participant, this was something that could be improved:

“For people who don't know that organisations like that [Gingerbread] exist, maybe to be a bit more visible, to put the name out there a bit more. They are very helpful but... I come from a country where we don't rely on charities too much, there isn't very strong help out there, everyone just deals by themselves. So I didn't even think to look for any help online. So its only thanks to my friend who mentioned about it, that it helped me some much.”

In comparison to our annual Helpline survey^{iv}, which shows a 12% referral rate from other organisations, in this research there is a notable absence of referrals from other organisations, public sector services such as doctors and social workers, and charities, such as domestic violence or homelessness support. These are organisations which single parents are likely to be interacting with, particularly those who are underrepresented in the Helpline's current service users. Therefore, we know that there is a potential for strengthening partnerships and referrals between Gingerbread and other services.

Use of other services

To better understand how and when people call the Gingerbread Helpline, participants were asked about the steps they took before calling. They were asked which other organisations they had sought advice from for the same issue. For about a third, Gingerbread was the first organisation that they went to. In some of these cases, this was due to a distrust of the information from other services. Those who had complex needs had contacted other organisations for these needs.

They were also asked whether they had used the Gingerbread website before calling the Helpline.

For those who hadn't, (a third of participants) it was because they weren't aware of it. For the two-thirds who had, there were several reasons why they called the Helpline afterwards. These were;

- They couldn't find specific answers to their questions
- They couldn't get information on their specific situation
- They wanted reassurance on their understanding of an issue
- The information was too complex to understand

All but one has used the website since calling and many still regularly use it or have downloaded the factsheets to refer back to.

Number of calls

For those who had called the Helpline more than once, a pattern emerged of a long initial call, in which a range of issues were discussed. Further calls by the same participant were usually shorter, concerning specific questions

or the impact of changed circumstances – for example the impact of increased working hours on their benefits.

Reasons for calling the Helpline

A range of issues that affect single parents were reported as the reasons why participants had called the Helpline. Whether or not they had initially planned to, nearly all ended up discussing benefits and tax credits in some capacity. For example, one single mother wanted to know if the council would take her child maintenance income into account when considering her council tax discount.

Another topic that was discussed was housing. In some cases this was social housing. In other cases, it related to housing access and payment after separation. For example, one single mother who was considering separation wanted to know if she would be allowed to stay in a jointly-owned property until her daughter was 18, as had been suggested by friends.

Employment was a third issue that participants called about. Specifically, returning to work after maternity leave, advice on leaving work for full time care, and rights in relation to flexible working. Advice on family law was also sought. One participant had called to ask about her options for controlling the father's access to her daughter, due to his irresponsible behaviour.

Analysis identified a trend; that callers who were planning or in the process of separation wanted advice on a range of these issues. One mother was calling for advice on how to achieve a no-fault divorce, her rights to the jointly-owned property and what benefits she was entitled to – a range of topics that she needed to understand as she began life as a single parent. A key strength of the Helpline is that it is able to provide this holistic advice across the range of issues that single parents face. Parents might have one question about benefits, but many get so much more than that. Being able to speak to someone allows the advisors to use their expertise to probe issues that parents themselves might not have even considered.

Investigating the importance of speaking to someone

Researching why people called the Helpline, a common theme to emerge was the importance of speaking to someone, as has been the case in previous research⁴. The interviews allowed us to investigate exactly what was meant by this and there were a variety of reasons why people felt it was important. There were:

- The emotional support and understanding that they receive from the Helpline advisors
- Reassurance and clarification on the information they already had
- Information tailored to their situation
- It was easy to express themselves and make themselves understood
- The option and ability to ask follow up questions
- Having all the information in one place

One participant felt that speaking to someone was necessary to navigate the wealth of contradictory information available online, and the chance to ask questions if they didn't understand. Another said that because of the specifics of each situation, it was important to understand the facts and to know the consequences of their actions – getting tailored advice from a Helpline advisor enabled them to do that.

“There is so much information online, some of it is contradictory or not clear. So to speak to someone live, who knows the issue and knows the subject, who knows the answers. And then if something isn't clear, they are there, able to help you, to answer straight away.”

For a mother who was taking some difficult decisions about contact arrangements, it was important for her to speak to someone so that she could articulate her motivations and not feel judged.

“I needed to speak to someone, and have someone reassure me that I'm not being

a bad person, or doing the wrong thing.”

In particular, it was suggested that at a time of separation and crisis, these benefits were particularly important – especially the opportunity to get some emotional support and a ‘human touch’, alongside the technical advice.

“There is definitely [something about speaking to someone], that human element is very important, especially when people are going through a major life change.”

Satisfaction of using the Helpline

The response to this topic in the interviews was overwhelmingly positive. The Helpline advisors were greatly appreciated and participants particularly praised the fact that:

- Advisors were helpful and understanding
- Advisors were experts
- Advisors were non-judgemental, respectful, and open-minded

“Some places...make you feel stupid. Like I've spoken to universal credit and places like that, and when I don't really understand what they're asking me to do, they just make you feel really thick. But Gingerbread didn't, I just felt really comfortable talking to them.”

“It was unusual to find someone who was like, ‘okay well we'll see what we can do for your situation’, rather than the general ‘this is what normally happens in a divorce’.”

“The two people I've spoken to on the helpline were extremely knowledgeable.”

In terms of the advice itself, the feedback was also extremely positive. Key themes to emerge were:

- The advice was comprehensive
- The advice was clear
- Callers were not rushed
- The advice was tailored to individual situations, including taking time to do benefit calculations

“Instead of giving out a call centre style, I felt like they tailored the advice to my situation.”

“They're very good practically, they have lots of information, it's a brilliant resource and they'll even come up with ideas you hadn't thought of.”

“Very useful...this is the only one [Helpline] I've ever had to use, because I got all the information in one place.”

“Every time I was on the phone with them, it would last for ages, it could even last for over an hour but they were like ‘no rush’. It was very informative, and very good pace.”

In addition, some participants felt that because of the quality of the advice that they had received from the Helpline, they did not need to seek further advice from other organisations.

“I haven't spoken to any other Helplines – I haven't thought to even look for them, because as far as I'm concerned, Gingerbread has given me all the answers I've needed.”

Many participants also mentioned that they would or had recommended the service to others.

Criticisms and suggestions for improvement

The strongest suggestion for improvement, which was echoed by many participants, was on opening hours and waiting times. Due to resource limitations, people often have to wait 20 minutes to get through to a Helpline advisor, and this was reflected in the responses. In addition, participants reported that opening hours often make it difficult for working parents to find time to call, especially if the waiting times mean that they can't call in their lunchbreak. However, everyone was very understanding about the fact that Gingerbread was a charity with limited resources. Some also mentioned that the website had made it clear that there would be a wait.

“The waits are not unreasonable considering it's a charity.”

“I knew I'd be waiting but it's made very clear on the website that when you call there'll be a long waiting time.”

There were a few other criticisms from participants about their experience with the Helpline. The first was that the advisors wouldn't give one caller direct advice about what she should do regarding her contact issue. However, she did say that she understood why they weren't able to do so.

The second was that the call had been too practical, factual, and impersonal, and hadn't catered to the callers' emotional needs. One caller said that on reflection, she may have misunderstood the purpose of the Helpline, and had sought emotional support elsewhere afterwards.

“At the time I was still struggling - I remember that the person was quite, not abrupt in a horrible way, but just very sort of factual. I think I needed - possibility Gingerbread might not have been the right line for me, I think I needed a bit of a listening ear.”

The Helpline aims to provide information and to discuss options. Therefore, while these are very valid criticisms it should be noted that giving advice on specific decisions and providing emotional support are both outside of the remit of the service. The advisors do sign to additional support where required and appropriate.

Impact

This section will examine the broader impact of participants' interactions with the Helpline, in line with the outcomes the Helpline is funded to achieve.

Single parents will report having increased resilience and being better able to cope

Participants largely reported that they had experienced improvement in their emotional state and in their attitudes to their difficulties; the Helpline is helping single parents to adapt to and manage their challenges. Depending on the subject of the call, these tended to fall into two groups. For some single parents, there was a clear sense of recovery and feeling relieved and reassured.

“I felt relieved. Relief that I didn't have to go back, that I was entitled to things that were going to help me.”

“It was like a massive weight had been lifted.”

This was the reaction of those who had called with worries and doubts about how they would manage in their new circumstances. For example, a single mother who didn't want to return to work after maternity leave – she was unhappy in the working environment and was worried about childcare for her son.

On the other hand, there were those who felt confident and empowered by the advice, informed and able to take steps to manage their difficulties.

“I feel like a lot more empowered to say this is my decision, the right one for her.”

“I felt a lot more confident in the next steps to take.”

“I felt empowered. I felt like okay, it's not the end of everything.”

For example, a single mother who had separated from her husband but was still living with him in their house spoke to the Helpline about benefits and housing. After the call, she felt empowered and confident that she would be able to move out and take control of her future.

Moreover, participants reporting this impact felt like they had a plan, or a series of next steps to take. Even for those who were not able to make immediate changes, they made a plan of action for the future, and activities they could prepare.

Therefore, an improvement in emotions and attitudes towards challenges was certainly reported. However, the self-reported importance of confidence and repeated references made to the utility of designing a plan with advisors, suggests that this would be better captured by a revised outcome; single parents increase confidence to address challenges they face and have a practical plan.

Case study

Amanda (not her real name) was still with her partner at the time of the call, but was anticipating separation. She arranged for her mother to look after her three year old daughter so that she could focus on the call, which lasted about 45 minutes and covered a range of topics including 'better off calculations', child maintenance, and her rights to a property jointly owned with her partner. Amanda said that the call to the Helpline was incredibly important for her, providing much needed confidence and reassuring her about her options. She felt that just being able to get clear and reliable information put her mind at rest from her worries about how she was going to cope as a single mum, and showed her that it would be possible. She said that after the call,

“The questions I'd asked, they weren't worries anymore. They aren't keeping me awake anymore.”

She also felt that she had a set of next steps to take, such as contacting a solicitor to get legal advice about her housing questions.

Single parents will report feeling better informed

Closely linked to the previous outcome, a group of participants also reported feeling more informed and knowledgeable about their rights and options as single parents.

“I came away feeling really positive and really informed about so many different things.”

For example, a single mum called the Helpline, wanting to know if the fact that the father was still registered at the family home would stop her claiming tax credits as a single parent. Having seen others get into trouble with tax credits through her job, she wanted to avoid making that mistake herself.

For another mother whose ex-partner had stopped contact without explanation, she said that she felt more confident and in control of the situation, now that she understood what steps to take if he gets in touch again. She has refocused her attention onto what is best for her children, now that she understand that this is also what the family court would do.

“I feel like I know what I'm doing.”

This has also had a positive impact on her daughter who has autism, for whom the refocussing has been a stabilising factor in her life.

“My daughter is happier than she ever has been.”

Of these participants, a number had no prior knowledge about the subjects they had called to discuss, and didn't know where to begin. In particular this related to the benefits system – for those who had never interacted with it, didn't know what they could claim or how to do so.

“I had no idea what it [tax credits] was and I had no idea really – because I'd always worked full time since leaving university so I'd never had to claim any benefits.”

“I was just desperate. I didn't know what to do, where to turn.”

This suggests that not only does the Helpline provide specific issue advice; it also helps layout the key support and information needed to navigate the challenges, and sets callers on their path as single parents. The rise in the use of the website after calling the Helpline that nearly all participants reported, suggests that this initial support also enables single parents to support themselves once they understand the context of single parents' rights and options. Therefore we suggest that revising this outcome would capture with more specificity what single parents told us the impact of the Helpline was. The revised outcome would be: 'single parents improve awareness of their rights and options e.g. contact, maintenance, benefits'.

Case study

Meera (not her real name), a newly single mum, had had to leave her partner's house and was living at her mum's, sharing a room with her two year old daughter and all of her belongings. She had applied to the council for support with housing. Two neighbouring councils were resisting housing Meera and she called the Helpline to seek advice on how to get her own accommodation. The living arrangement with her mum was meant to be temporary and ended up lasting nearly a year, and it was stressful and damaging to her relationship with her family. The Helpline advisor informed Meera about her rights to social housing because she was legally homeless and about how she could challenge the councils. Armed with this information which she wasn't previously aware of, Meera did just that, with the outcome that both agreed to house her. She is now happy in her home:

“I'm really independent now and I'm feeling settled, and my daughter has her own room, her own cot bed again. She's got place to play, a back garden where she can play, she's got her slides. That wasn't that how it was before.”

This has reduced her stress, but it has also improved the contact between her daughter and her father. The daughter cannot visit the father's home, and so when he wanted contact with her, they would all have to go out together. Now that her daughter has her own space, the father can come and spend time with her in a more normal environment. “He used to take her out every week but I'd have to go with him, which was really annoying. But now he can come whenever, he can bath her and put her to bed. It's more settling for her.”

Single parents will report decreased levels of isolation after using the services

The Helpline offers single parents emotional support and guidance at a time of crisis. As has been discussed already, speaking to someone is important, especially at a time of separation or change. Advisors are seen as supportive and non-judgemental, and the call was a “psychological boost”, with some participants adding that they felt less alone after the call.

However, this was in addition to the practical advice given, rather than a benefit on its own. In discussing their support networks, it was clear that single parents experience isolation on a deeper and longer term level than a Helpline could hope to combat.

“It’s more social than advice – I don’t need to speak to someone from the Helpline, I just need someone who can understand that I’m having a bad day.”

Participants really felt the absence of a partner to share their emotional challenges with, felt stigmatised, and socially isolated in situations where there weren’t other single parents.

“That’s the thing about being a single parent, you don’t have a partner to share the good times and the bad times. Someone to bounce off, a shoulder to cry on.”

“I’ve got lots of friends but they’re all happily married. Sometimes I just don’t want to be around that, it’s too painful.”

As a result, most participants said that it was important for them to meet and socialise with other single parents. Many had tried Gingerbread groups or the Gingerbread forum, with mixed results (details below). There were also a number of callers who hadn’t used or heard of these or other Gingerbread services, suggesting there is space to improve referrals and linkages between Gingerbread’s services.

All of this suggests that the Helpline is not clearly meeting the outcome to decrease isolation, but that it isn’t the right service to deliver this outcome. There is clearly demand for support to tackle isolation via other Gingerbread services and room for improvement in these areas. Therefore, this outcome should be revised to encompass better what the Helpline delivers; single parents will report that they felt supported through crisis or change. The value that people found in speaking to someone suggests that this is an outcome that the Helpline is delivering well.

Case study

Alisha (not her real name), single mum to three boys under 12, called the Helpline with questions regarding her rights at work, where her position was being made full time.

She was unable to do these hours due to her childcare responsibilities. She said that the Helpline advisors were kind and empathetic, something that was really important to her as she was feeling isolated and in need of support.

Alisha had a really positive experience on the call, saying it made her feel “empowered” and “reassured”. However, the social isolation that exists for single parents still exists for her.

“All these years I’ve been going to organisations for support...I’ve had brilliant help, loads of help from all organisations, I can’t knock it. But it’s not the same.”

While having a partner or a close family support network would make the biggest difference, she does use Facebook groups to link with other single parents and finds this an important way to connect with people going through similar experiences to her.

Single parents will report improved financial well-being

The Helpline provides expert and tailored advice on finances. The need to balance work and care presents challenges to single parents. The lack of well-paid, secure, and sustainable work that is flexible to these needs means that many single parents often struggle financially - a third of children with a working single parent lived in relative poverty in 2015/16.^{vi} Single parents have been especially affected by the welfare reform programme since 2010 and are predicted to have lost an average of 15% of their net income by 2021/22.^{vii} Finally, although legally entitled to it, 60% of single parents do not receive any child maintenance.^{viii}

Therefore, in the current policy and economic climate, it is difficult for the Helpline to take steps to improve financial well-being. Instead, single parents are reporting income maximisation within the practical boundaries that exist, as a result of their use of the Helpline.

For a group of participants, the Helpline gave them information and clarity about the benefits they could claim, which had a significant impact on their lives in the long term.

One mother had recently separated and was able to keep her home and job, and avoid having to move abroad to stay with her parents, because of this advice. This also had a positive impact on her young daughter who was able to enjoy the stability of staying in one place after a period of travel and instability in the year before.

“[Gingerbread] are the reason why I’m still here, why I’m still working. Even for my daughter, she was being moved from one country to another which is not good and not healthy.”

Another received information about the benefits she could claim instead of returning to work after maternity leave, where she had been bullied. For those who had reported relief and a reassurance after talking to the Helpline, some referred specifically to the fact they had been told that they would be able to manage financially in the future. Some callers spoke about the importance of income maximisation as the thing that enabled them to cope as a single parent.

“Once you get what you’re meant to get, how much of a difference it makes.”

Therefore, once again, we suggest a revision of this outcome to ‘single parents improve financial understanding on how to maximise their income’.

Case study

Sarah (not her real name) is a single mother to her 11 year old son, who has complex needs relating to his disability. She is the sole parent, with the father absent and untraceable. The Gingerbread Helpline has helped her to maximise her income with long term impact on her mental health and son’s well-being.

She was working in a stressful and busy job with long hours and was struggling to manage this alongside caring for her son. His behaviour was becoming increasingly difficult and it was starting to have an impact on her mental health – she wanted to leave the job but couldn’t see how she would manage financially. She contacted the Helpline - they discussed her options, and the advisor informed her that because of her son’s disability, she could leave that job and claim income support as a carer.

This is what Sarah did, and it has had a significant impact on her life. She has been able to care for her son full time, improving her own mental health in the process. She has also been able to move closer to family who can support her with her care responsibilities. Her son has also notably improved, something that she attributes to her ability to give him more of her time.

“The initial step of changing our life in that awful situation we were in, and it was pretty desperate at the point, was that lady on the Helpline.”

Wider support and Gingerbread services

Thinking more broadly, we wanted to understand single parents support networks and provision, and to locate the Helpline and Gingerbread within them. Participants were asked to discuss their support networks and use of support and advice services, as well as what they felt was missing in this provision.

Within Gingerbread

Gingerbread wants to better understand how it can support parents at different stages of their journey and how it refers between services. We asked about parents' engagement with other Gingerbread services to understand if the Helpline has a role to play in referring and supporting onto other services we offer.

Peer Support Groups

Some had not heard of Gingerbread's peer support groups, but for those who had, there were mixed experiences. Some people were disappointed that there wasn't one in their area; some found that parents in the groups were unenthusiastic about taking part; and some didn't like the activities, or the times they were held. There were also some comments about the management of groups; that the voluntary coordinators needed more training; that it took too long to get a reply; and one who said she had not been allowed to join because she didn't live in the correct area. However, from those who knew about them, there was unanimous support for the idea of the groups – single parents really want the opportunity to meet each other.

Forum

Again, there was a mixed reception for the forum from those who had used it. Some felt that it was a helpful and supportive space to get advice and feel connected to people who were going through the same experience. Others however, felt overwhelmed by the contradictory advice from parents, and one was upset by the criticism she had received from other users.

Website

While some participants had felt that they needed more information when they first looked at the website, and so had called the Helpline, most reported that they now use it and find it useful. There were a couple of topics that were noted as lacking enough information; single parents across borders; postgraduate education; and disability.

Future services

A webchat is one service being considered for the future, and we took this opportunity to ask participants if they would be interested in using this method for support and advice.

A few parents were positive about the possibility of Gingerbread opening a webchat advice service, but most were against the idea in place of their Helpline call. Reasons given for this were,

- Previous bad experience with government/customer service webchats
- Too much information to give and comprehend online
- It's a difficult method to explain feelings
- It lacks emotional support and human connection; and its slow and convoluted.

When asked to consider if a webchat might be useful for other types of calls, the types of calls suggested were; simple queries or sign-posting; when the caller is too upset; or for domestic violence victims to enable secrecy.

Therefore, we discovered that the linkages between the Helpline and the website were working really well, with both services complementing each other and the website providing additional advice after the Helpline call was made. However, this is more to be done to link the Helpline with the peer support groups and forum, especially

as these might be more appropriate channels to deliver impact on reduced isolation.

Wider support networks

We wanted to better understand single parents' support needs, in order to inform the design and focus of Gingerbread's services. As might be expected, participants reported a huge variety in the forms and strengths of their support network. Roughly, emotional support categories were; those who had good emotional support from friends and/or close family; those with no parental support; and those with no support. Some had also received logistical support from friends and family, such as childcare, temporary living arrangements, and money.

Some parents used online groups and forums to connect with other single parents who understood their experiences. This was very important for many participants, or was an aspiration, especially for those who had experienced a significant change in circumstances when they became a single parent, and now felt separated from their previous friends and life.

There was a mixed response in terms of support from nurseries and employers, with some reporting support, understanding, and flexibility, and some reporting obstruction and feeling ostracised.

Gaps in single parent support

Interviewees were also asked what the gaps in their support network were. Again responses varied, but several clear trends emerged. The lack of a partner created two gaps. One was practical - the absence of emergency childcare in the event of illness or job interviews. The second was emotional – not having anyone to vent to, or somewhere to go for day-to-day emotional support – and some wanted structured, professional support for this. Some participants voiced their fear of being a burden on their family and friends, both emotionally and in terms of child care.

Some participants also said they experienced isolation and stigma as a single parent, something they hadn't considered until they became one. This was particularly prevalent with those parents who didn't know many other single parents, or who lived in affluent areas where they felt there weren't many.

These two findings are important learning for us. The Helpline isn't the service to deliver on these but there are aspects of other Gingerbread services that could. We can use this insight to shape the design of peer support and the forum to more specifically address this, helping Gingerbread to provide ongoing and holistic support to single parents throughout their journey.

Learning and recommendations

Refining our understanding of the impact of the helpline

The learning from what Helpline users told us has helped to clarify and define exactly what impact the Helpline delivers. Carrying out qualitative interviews allowed us to question and understand this impact in depth and detail. To summarise:

- Single parents did experience improved emotions and attitudes towards challenges but with a focus on confidence and the benefit of having a plan to move forward
- Single parents reported feeling better informed, and more specifically, were given an awareness of the statutory and support landscape for single parents, enabling some to take decisions with real and practical positive outcomes, such as achieving housing stability
- Due to practical limits in the current policy climate, instead of delivering improved financial well-being, Helpline calls helped parents maximise their income
- We identified that single parents experience significant isolation and need emotional support, but that the Helpline was not a service that could deliver an impact on this. However, in addition to advice, the emotional support and human touch gained from speaking to someone was beneficial and appreciated

Therefore, we recommend that the impact outcomes for the Helpline are revised to better represent what the Helpline is able to deliver. To proposed new outcomes are:

- Single parents increase confidence to address challenges they face and have a practical plan in place to take action
- Single parents receive reassurance and connection in a period of change/crisis
- Single parents improve financial understanding on how to maximise their income
- Single parents have improved awareness of their rights and options e.g. contact, benefits

Journey to the Helpline

Most parents found the Helpline through an internet search for separation or single parent advice, or by suggestion from family and friends, suggesting it was often by accident or chance. Unlike our annual survey, there was a notable absence of referrals from other agencies, public sector organisations and charities. This suggests that strengthening these partnerships and referral routes could enable more single parents to access the Helpline, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised.

'One big call'

The evaluation highlighted that for many participants calling the Helpline was part of 'one big call', made to understand the range of issues they face as new, or potential, single parent. There is a pattern of a type of call which the Helpline delivers very well and that has a significant impact. It is the 'scoping' call – usually made at a time of separation or other significant change, by someone who has had little or no previous contact with the benefits system, family law courts, or other systems linked to being a single parent. They need answers to the breadth of issues that Gingerbread works on and supportive guidance through their range of questions. In some cases, Gingerbread is even able to give them answers to questions they didn't know they had.

This has been identified across the research. For example, the prevalence of parents who said they called at a time of change, and the pattern of making a long initial call, and then using the website for additional advice afterwards. It can also be seen when participants said that they didn't know anything about the issue that they called to discuss, or the belief that the website wouldn't have been enough for them on their first call.

Usually, these calls provide reassurance and confidence that there are potential solutions and help single parents to make a plan. Callers come away feeling more informed about single parents' rights and options, and are supported to maximise their income. The research in this evaluation suggests that these calls support single parents and their families to cope in the immediate term, if not thrive in the future.

This understanding is important for us to consider when the Helpline can best support single parents, and where the Helpline fits within the range of services we provide. For many, it is their first significant interaction with Gingerbread and there is an opportunity here to sign post to other areas of our support, and thus support them throughout their journey.

The importance of speaking to someone

The research shows that speaking to someone, especially in a time of crisis or change, has unique and irreplaceable benefits, and that thus the Helpline plays a very important role in the range of advice and information services that Gingerbread offers. The issues facing single parents are complex and there are very practical reasons why speaking to someone is preferred, such as the opportunity to ask follow up questions. In addition, for single parents making their 'one big call', they are often in a place of emotional fragility and need a human touch to guide them through their practical challenges.

This research reinforces our understanding of the unique need for and benefits of a telephone helpline for a particular set of single parents. This provides further evidence of the importance of protecting the intensive telephone channel, alongside continuing to develop our digital content and channels of advice to allow those with simpler queries and those not 'in crisis' to self-serve online.

Participants also express frustrations at long waiting times and opening hours. The evaluation highlights the importance of high quality advice and we must find ways to address the challenge of extending advice provision without impacting on quality and within budget limitations.

Holistic support and advice

Participants might have called for advice on one issue, but very often they got advice on far more than that. Single parents face a complex interplay of challenges, and this research found that while they may have called to discuss, for example housing, they will very often end up also discussing benefits, child maintenance, or family law. At times, these were topics or issues that they hadn't thought of or known about. An additional benefit of speaking to someone was the ability for advisors to probe and direct these conversations so callers got the comprehensive information they needed.

The Helpline and Gingerbread

The Helpline is a potential entry point to Gingerbread for single parents, and with the potential to create sustained interaction. From Gingerbread's perspective, it is important to understand if and how this link is made. This research has shown that there are clear connections between the Helpline and use of the website. There are also some linkages between Helpline use and other Gingerbread services such as the forum and the peer support groups, but that there is also potential for improvement here. The research has shown that there is clear interest in these services, so this is an area for potential development.

Opening hours and waiting times

This evaluation has identified that sometimes there are queues for the Helpline and that the opening hours aren't always appropriate for working single parents. This is something that the advice team is aware of and has already begun to work on within budgetary limitations, such as optimising the rota and recruiting sessional staff. A recommendation for further research would be to investigate what alternative opening hours are most in demand, with a view to adapting the hours in the future. However, to fully meet the demand for the depth and breadth of expertise that the Helpline delivers, more funding would be required to expand the service.

Appendix

Discussion guide

Research Objectives

- To understand and evaluate how the Helpline is used by single parents;
- To identify the short-term and long-term impact that the Gingerbread Helpline has for single parents;
- To understand the support requirements of single parents to evolve and develop the Helpline and other Gingerbread services.

Research Questions

- Who are the Gingerbread Helpline users?
- How and why do single parents come to the Helpline?
- What is been the experience of single parents using the Helpline?
- Did single parents use the advice they received on the helpline and how was the experience?
- What impact did the advice single parents received have on their situation and wider family?
- What does the broader support system look like for single parents? How does Gingerbread fit into this? What are the gaps?
- How can Gingerbread's advice services be developed in the future?

Introduction

- Introduce interviewer, role, and relationship with Gingerbread.
- Brief overview of project and why we're doing it:
 - Gingerbread is carrying out an evaluation of its helpline and wants to understand wants to understand its impact and how it can be improved.
 - We're speaking to single parents from a range of backgrounds to get different views, all views are equally important to Gingerbread.
- Consent, anonymity and data storage. *Refer back to the information leaflet and talk them through it to make sure they're happy with it. Emphasise:*
 - Voluntary nature of study, and right to change mind at any time. No need to answer any questions they feel uncomfortable with.
 - Data from the interviews will be stored securely by the research team and used to write a series of outputs including a report which will be published on Gingerbread's website.
 - Any personal data we hold on you will be deleted by December 2021.
 - Quotes will be used but will be anonymous
 - Please be as honest and open as you can – no right or wrong answers.
 - Interview will last around 1 hour
 - Any questions?
 - Are they happy for recorder to be turned on?

- Turn digital recorder on if respondent confirms consent.

1. Icebreaker and background to the family

- Number and ages/genders of children
- School/nursery/childcare arrangements
- When/how did you become a single parent?
- Shared/lone parenting

2. EXPERIENCE of using the Helpline

- Where did they find out about helpline?
 - If they say online, ask specifically where – link, google search.
- When did they call the helpline?
- Reason for calling the helpline
 - Type of help sought (advice, support, advocacy etc.)?
 - Issues that help was sought for
 - Have they called before or is this the first time?
- Satisfaction with the helpline
 - Accessibility
 - Advice - useful/ relevant/new
 - Treatment/support
 - Expectations vs reality
 - Criticisms and improvement
 - Recommend to others/use again
- Prior to contacting the Helpline - awareness of other Gingerbread services – eg website, member, social media, forums, local group, training programme, fundraiser/supporter.
- Contact/use of other Gingerbread advice.
 - What issue / information / use.
 - Specifically ask about website if have previously used the website.
 - *Reasons to call helpline if previously used website.*
 - *Reasons to not use website if aware of it.*
- Did you contact anyone else about this issue? If yes, who?
 - Why chose Gingerbread if others possible?
- What specifically was the impact of the opportunity to 'speak to someone'?

Look to tease out exactly what people mean by this.

- Emotional benefits or specific information.
- Specialism of Helpline Advisor – expertise, impartial etc.?

- Could your query have been dealt with by a web chat?
 - If answer no 'can you imagine a situation where a webchat would work for you?'

3. ACTIONS taken after using the Helpline

- FEELING after contacting helpline
 - Informed, able to cope, supported
 - Plan of action
- ACTED on the information
 - What did they do with the information
 - What actions taken?
 - In line with advisors' information?
 - Did you have interactions with other agencies or organisations?

4. IMPACT of Helpline

Introduce idea of thinking more broadly about the impact of the helpline, after receiving information, taking actions, reacting to outcomes. (This may need to be adapted to responses to section 3, for example if they did not have a positive outcome/did not take any action).

- What impact did calling the helpline have on you personally:
 - Resilience – problem solving, sense of control, support, stress.
 - Knowledge
 - Ability to cope
 - Decision making
 - Feeling less isolated
 - Material changes – financial, work, legal changes.
- What impact did the advice and actions you took as a result of calling the helpline have on your children?
 - School/support for children
 - Stress/relationship/contact with parent etc
 - Social/emotional
 - Financial
- What would have been different if you hadn't called the Helpline?

5. WIDER CONTEXT of support and Gingerbread within it.

- Summarise what your support network looks like;
 - Friends/family, statutory agency (social care, housing, benefits), charity, professional.
 - Who provides short-term support (to address an immediate issue)?
 - Who provides long-term support (to help them achieve longer-term aims)?

- Is it important for you to know other single parents?
- Thinking about how you access support, when contacting friends or family for support, do you have a preference whether it is by phone or messaging service?
 - Why? Convenience, discreet, nice to speak to someone.
- If you were contacting an organisation such as Gingerbread for advice, do you prefer to do so via phone or online messaging if you had the option?
 - Why? Convenience, discreet, nice to speak to someone?
 - Does/could this change for any reason – eg different circumstances/issues/location?
- Have you received any support from other charities or organisations?
 - What has/hasn't worked well from other organisations – eg one-to-one meetings, web chat.
- Gaps in support – generally from all areas of life
 - Issue – work, finances, housing, education (for children), emotional support, parenting, legal
 - Long term/short time - responding to event or ongoing
 - Format – face to face, phone, online (website, forum, emails)
 - Potential impact from this support

6. FINISHING UP

Final thoughts

- Anything not covered that they want to share
- Anything they thought they would be asked
- Any questions? Remind them that they can contact us at any point with any questions or concerns.
- Let them know that we post the vouchers once a week. Collect address to post it to.
- Ask preferred method of being contacted/happy for us to stay in touch for sharing research and anything else related to the research.

References

ⁱ Advice and Information Evaluation Report 2017-18. Gingerbread 2017-18. p10.

ⁱⁱ Advice and Information Evaluation Report 2017-18

ⁱⁱⁱ Gingerbread Statistics 'Who are single parents'. <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/statistics/>

^{iv} Advice and Information Evaluation Report 2017-18

^v Advice and Information Evaluation Report

^{vi} Rabindrakumar S. 2018. One in Four: A Profile of Single Parents in the UK. Gingerbread.p7 <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/One-in-four-a-profile-of-single-parents-in-the-UK.compressed.pdf>

^{vii} Ibid p11

^{viii} Ibid

Gingerbread

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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