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Single Parent Families

Police *Family Support* Guidance



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Overview & Legislation

In 2024 16.1% of families in the UK with dependent children were headed by a single parent¹. Although there is no specific measure of single parents within policing, it can be assumed that this is likely to reflect wider society with 83.3% of single parents nationally being female².

Being a single or lone parent can bring many challenges including financial stress with the sole weight of responsibility, a lack of shared childcare provision for shift changes, training and other work commitments, emotional fatigue, loneliness, isolation and guilt.

In this guidance document, where "single parent(s)" is referred to, this includes both serving police officers and forces' civilian staff members as this guidance is equally applicable to both. This distinction matters in a number of respects: police officers hold the office of constable and are not employees, and their conditions of service are governed by the Police Act 1996, the Police Regulations 2003, and force policy. Civilian staff are employees with the full range of statutory employment rights. The Equality Act 2010 applies to both groups. Where a particular right or entitlement applies differently to police officers and to civilian staff, this is made explicit below.

Financial

Over the last few years, the cost of living in the UK has risen, with essentials such as housing, bills and food becoming increasingly expensive. This increase has been in marked contradiction to below inflation wage rises, leaving many parents facing huge financial decisions. The impact, however, can be felt more acutely by single parents due to their specific circumstances.

Single parents often experience a substantial change in family circumstances, such as a divorce, separation, house sale or bereavement, which can have a challenging financial impact on them. Childcare costs and availability can be restrictive, with premiums for out of hours care more likely to be used by public sector workers.

¹ Office of National Statistics

² Office of National Statistics

Many single parents face a decision between increased working with additional costs, or side-lining their career to reduce this outlay, potentially missing out on the possibility of earning more and longer-term promotional opportunities. In 2024, 44% of children in single parent households were in relative poverty, compared to 26% for children in couple-parent families³. Couples who are in debt may have greater opportunity to obtain additional funds than single parents, for example, through overtime, leaving single parents with increased risk of being left in a debt trap. Standard government entitlements may unintentionally disadvantage lone parents, with the possibility of full child benefit being paid to a couple earning £120,000 combined per year, in contrast to a lone parent earning £60,000 individually⁴.

76% of single parent families in the UK are now in debt⁵, with 1 in 5 single parents using food banks⁶. Within the police there is still a stigma around debt which can prevent those in need proactively asking for support. Some forces are now proactively including financial considerations within their wellbeing strategies. Unmanageable debt could also make members of the police vulnerable and susceptible to influence or added pressure by criminal individuals or groups. Options for those struggling include, for some forces, an emergency advance on the monthly wage or an application to their Force Relief/Welfare Board⁷. Financial providers specifically targeting police officers and civilian staff also supply affordable credit options, with low or zero interest loans.

Some single parents have taken the decision to withdraw from their police, local government or civil service pension, facing a need to use the extra money within their monthly wage for regular outgoings. This choice can leave some single parents without pension provision, creating financial challenges later in life when it may not be possible to recover the loss. Where this happens the individual also loses the employer contributions and associated benefits. Single parents working part-time hours could be unable to make up the shortfall in pension loss, whether through lack of funds or time.

³ Department For Work and Pensions (after housing costs)

⁴ www.gov.uk 2025 figures

⁵ Gingerbread.org.uk 2023 figures

⁶ Commonslibrary.parliament.uk 2020 figures

⁷ This is not available in all Forces



Wellbeing

Rising costs and financial insecurity may affect self-esteem, psychological welfare, sleep and physical health, with 50% of single parents in the UK reporting a decline in their mental health due to these factors⁸. Being a single parent can be isolating, with reports highlighting feelings of worry, stress, anxiety, and depression⁹. This can lead to individuals having to take time off work and perpetuate negative feelings and lack of progression within the police.

Single parents may have faced the emotional stress of bereavement, loss, relationship breakdown or the decision to parent alone, with resultant impact on their children, as well as their own mental health. This mental load means that single parents often shoulder the responsibility, time, and support for childcare. This may be with only limited emotional support networks. This should not be overlooked by line managers.

Single parents who do not primarily reside with their children can face additional emotional stress being apart. Single parents who are faced with short notice shift changes, training or overtime expectations can be left without suitable options for childcare, reinforcing feelings of isolation and emotional anxiety, specifically relating to the potential detriment to their work colleagues and their children.

⁸ Gingerbread.org.uk 2023 figures

⁹ Mentalhealth.org.uk

Professional Development



Flexible working

Civilian staff members (as employees) have a statutory right to request flexible working, which applies from day one of employment. A civilian staff member may make up to two requests per year, and the force must consult with the individual before refusing any request. A request may only be refused on one or more of the eight statutory grounds under section 80G of the Employment Rights Act 1996 (as amended). Police officers are not employees and, therefore, have no statutory right to request flexible working; their ability to do so derives entirely from force policy and, where applicable, Police Regulations determinations. Forces should seek to apply equivalent provisions to police officers as a matter of good practice. In both cases, flexible working requests should be accepted wherever possible and declined only where one of the above statutory grounds applies in the case of civilian staff, or where there are genuine and documented operational reasons in the case of police officers. These should not restrict careers, specialisms or promotional aspirations. Childcare costs have increased, with the availability of settings that cater for unsocial hours scarce. Balancing a desired role with roster patterns and childcare arrangements can be challenging. In some cases, this may limit access to certain positions and reduce opportunities, which can impact efforts to improve workforce diversity, difference and engendering inclusion.

Career Progression

For police officers and civilian staff members alike, the concern of short notice shift changes, training and compulsory overtime can leave single parents with limited role options, potentially hindering career prospects. Many specialisms can create barriers for single parents due to shift pattern expectations that may be unachievable. When compromises are found, the perception of not following the team pattern can be emotionally challenging, for example the inability to perform

night shifts. Compulsory postings to meet the core business needs of the force can put added pressure on single parents not to apply for promotion for fear of being allocated an unsuitable role, reducing the pool of promotion talent for forces.

Training courses can be unsuitable for many part time and flexible rosters, negatively impacting police officers and civilian staff member who are single parents and are faced with a loss of opportunity or the additional financial burden of extra childcare.

Discrimination

When creating policies relating to flexible working, promotions and postings, forces need to be mindful of the balancing exercise they must undertake between the needs of the force and the needs of the single parent. Policies that prioritise operational requirements, without due cognisance of the balance with the needs of the single parent, leave forces open to tribunal claims. Policies which purport to be fair solely because they apply to all police officers and civilian staff regardless of which protected characteristics they possess may fall foul of the indirect [DP6.1]discrimination provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

It is important to note that "single parent" or "parental status" is not itself a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. A single parent who has been disadvantaged by a force policy or practice cannot therefore bring a claim based on their parental status.

The most relevant protected characteristic in the context of single parents is typically sex, given that 83.3% of single parents nationally are female, meaning that a policy or practice that disadvantages single parents will, in most cases, disproportionately disadvantage women. Other protected characteristics may also be relevant in specific circumstances. A policy that has a disproportionate impact on single parents is not automatically unlawful: it may be justified if the force can demonstrate that it is a proportionate means of achieving a genuine operational objective. However, that justification must be evidenced and must be proportionate - generalised assertions of operational need will not suffice.

Posting policies that do not acknowledge those with childcare responsibilities are open to challenge, such as *Hayley Burden v Hampshire Constabulary*. This particular case did not involve a single parent but demonstrates that forces may need to be more flexible to accommodate the needs of police officers with childcare responsibilities and not disadvantage them if those needs prevent them from working at specific times; the same logic also applies to civilian staff.

If a workplace culture creates an environment where a single parent feels pressured to meet unrealistic expectations or experiences negative comments about their working arrangements, this may amount to unlawful harassment under the Equality Act 2010. To constitute harassment under the Act, the unwanted conduct must be related to a protected characteristic and must have the purpose or effect of violating the individual's dignity, or of creating an

intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment. As noted above, "single parent" or "parental status" is not itself a protected characteristic. However, where the unwanted conduct is related to the individual's sex, for example, where a female single parent is subjected to negative comments or unrealistic expectations because of assumptions about her role as a mother, this may constitute harassment related to the protected characteristic of sex. As stated above, the most likely protected characteristic relevant to single parents is sex, given that single parents are disproportionately women. However, men who are single parents and whose caring responsibilities are not supported or taken seriously because of assumptions related to their being a man may equally bring harassment or sex discrimination claims. This protection applies to civilian staff members, and to police officers by virtue of section 42 of the Equality Act 2010.

Recommendations

- Provide information for line managers and other internal support teams to signpost police officers and civilian staff members struggling financially, practically and emotionally to suitable help¹⁰.
- Ensure force policy on special leave considers the impact of pressures on single parents who may, for example, have lost a partner or are negotiating the difficulties of separation. There is no statutory right to "special leave" in the general sense used here, this is a matter entirely for force policy, and the recommendation is made as a discretionary best practice aspiration. Forces should also be aware that where an officer or civilian staff member has suffered bereavement, separate bereavement leave provisions may apply under force policy or, for civilian staff, under any applicable statutory or contractual bereavement entitlement.
- Ensure that force policy on parental leave is clearly communicated to all police officers and civilian staff members. For civilian staff (as employees), parental leave is governed by statute and entitles eligible employees to up to 18 weeks of unpaid leave per child, to be taken before the child's 18th birthday. Forces may offer more generous provisions than the statutory minimum by force policy. Police officers are not employees and therefore have no statutory right to statutory parental; equivalent provisions for officers are provided by force policy and Police Regulations determinations. Force policy on parental leave should be clearly communicated to both groups and applied consistently.
- Ensure that force policy on time off for dependants is clearly communicated to all police officers and civilian staff members. For civilian staff (as employees), the right to time off for dependants is governed by statute, which entitles employees to take a reasonable amount of unpaid time off to

¹⁰ This could be via internal staff support associations, Occupational Health and other welfare support systems, UK Police financial organisations, trade unions or external charities.

deal with unexpected or sudden emergencies involving a dependant, including the illness of a dependant, an unexpected breakdown in care arrangements, or dealing with an incident involving a child at a school. This is distinct from parental leave and covers the circumstances that will most commonly arise for single parents, such as a child falling ill, medical appointments arising at short notice, and unexpected school events. For police officers, the equivalent entitlement is provided under Annex T of the Police Regulations 2003, which provides for reasonable paid time off to deal with emergencies involving a dependant. Force policy on time off for dependants and emergency leave should be clearly communicated to both police officers and civilian staff and applied consistently.

- Establish a single parent coaching/mentoring scheme for promotion and specialism applications.
- Consider ensuring that training course schedules are suitable for part time and flexible workers by offering varied days of the week and differing course lengths, with a blended online option wherever practicable.
- As a matter of discretionary best practice, forces should consider adopting a force policy that permits civilian staff members to make more than the statutory minimum of two flexible working requests per year. A force cannot "extend" the statutory limit as such, the statute sets a floor, not a ceiling, but forces may choose to offer additional policy-based entitlements beyond the statutory minimum. For police officers, who have no statutory right to request flexible working and whose entitlement derives from force policy, any limit on the number of requests per year is equally a matter of force policy, and forces should consider whether it is appropriate to place any restriction on the number of requests an officer may make.
- Provide mandatory training for all line managers covering people policies, processes and their role in supporting single parents and creating a positive environment within diversity and equal opportunities training.
- Consider adding single parent as a category on staff monitoring data and staff surveys to enhance awareness for forces. Identify more touch points to collect this data so the impact of policies, practices and culture on single parents can be monitored and addressed.
- When completing EIAs, forces should consider whether any policy that has a disproportionate impact on single parents can be justified as a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.
- Forces should consider, as a discretionary best practice aspiration, adopting a force policy that permits both civilian staff members and police officers to take parental leave in single days or combinations of days, rather than only in the statutory default of weekly blocks. Forces should note that this recommendation concerns parental leave specifically; it is distinct from the entitlement to time off for dependants (see above), which applies on an individual-event basis and is not subject to the same weekly-block requirement.

- Consideration should be given to the impact of short notice shift changes for police officers and civilian staff on childcare arrangements; for example, having a clear policy on a reasonable notification period for shift changes and mandatory training may be beneficial¹¹.
 - Establish support networks offering support to those who are single parents¹². These networks should be open to police officers and civilian staff members alike. These are inclusive and sympathetic peer-led networks, designed to combat and mitigate challenges faced by lone parents and their families and to enhance wellbeing, welfare and retention. They offer a safe space to talk, receive and offer support, and provide access to a wealth of advice and information on shift patterns, finance, entitlements, and mental health.
 - Consider incorporating challenges faced by single parents into Workplace Passports within forces, where these exist.
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¹¹ Short notice changes for police staff are detailed in the PSC handbook and police staff are under no obligation to accept

¹² SILO is a Single, Independent, Lone and One parent support network, now being established in some Forces, created to be inclusive to all families and genders, pre and post break up, following bereavement, divorce, separation, and any decision to raise a child as a single or lone person