Dads’ Club is a group (established in 2001) of single fathers and their pre-school aged children who meet in Edinburgh each Saturday. We do activities with our children such as swimming, outdoor play, Bookbug sessions, crafts, while also sharing with each other our experiences of being single fathers. Our circumstances differ from having contact with our children once a week, to seeing them several times a week, to having full time care of our children (who have little or no contact with their mum). This last group makes up the majority of the views collected. Having said that, it should be acknowledged from the outset that ‘single father’ can mean many different things and represents a range of circumstances. Please don’t assume that our children all need the same thing.

Like mothers, we want the best for our children. Also like mothers, this is more difficult to achieve as a single parent. There are practical and cultural issues that place added barriers in front of our children that we would like to see addressed by the Scottish Government. Some of these issues are quite complex and will not be overcome quickly, but given that 1 in 4 children in Scotland is a member of a single parent home, ‘Getting it Right for Every Child’ will never happen without addressing these points.

- **Contact with Services** - Too often separated fathers are seen as a ‘luxury,’ nice to have around but not essential to the development of children. This view of men and fathers is quite entrenched in our culture, and by extension is present in the staff that we encounter in many different areas. Of particular concern to us, is how we are treated by different early years services, staffed almost entirely by women.
  - Many of us have encountered prejudice from nursery staff who assume that we are not as capable as mothers, and not respected accordingly. We wonder whether being proactive in hiring more men in these services would help this perspective evolve.
  - This is also true with Health Visitors who (when mum has been around) focus solely on the mother, failing to acknowledge the role we have to play in the health of our children. We would like to see greater emphasis placed on health visitors to document their interaction with fathers.
  - There are some of us who have been involved with social workers (inevitably female) making decisions regarding the future care of our children. They have demonstrated clear gender bias when making those decisions, at times accommodating children based on misconceptions of our abilities and ignoring our parental rights and responsibilities. While the Childrens Hearing System should protect our children from these abuses, the views of social workers outweigh others and poor decisions are made. We would like to see greater expectations placed on social workers to involve fathers in care planning and audits of cases to ensure that this is happening.
As single parents with sole care of our children, many of us are in receipt of benefits. Almost without exception, the attitude of staff on the phone and in Jobcentres, is uncaring of our circumstances as single parents and disregards our role as fathers (assuming that there is a mother doing the majority of the child care). This is evident when we are ignored regarding the scheduling of appointments (unnecessarily forcing us to bring our children along to the Jobcentre), the poor attitude of staff in those centres, and most importantly the severe inefficiency with which benefits are set up and transitioned between parents. Many of us have had to endure a huge gap of time while the HMRC confirms that we are rightly claiming Child Benefit on behalf of our sons and daughters. This of course means that we cannot make applications for Income Support, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit. We cannot work because of our caring responsibilities, yet are expected to go months without any income. We feel it important to look at the inefficiency that often surrounds fathers taking over the care of children 0-4 yrs and improve the support from the DWP and HMRC.

**Provision of services** – We feel that services such as the Edinburgh Lone Fathers Project/Dads’ Club are a good model of support. They acknowledge some of the challenges to single fathers, and supports them to be the best parents they can be to their children. Some of us travel a long way to be part of this group, and we are aware that most parts of Scotland do not have access to this kind of support. We would like to see greater emphasis and funding made available for similar support across the country. This would reflect commitments made in the National Parenting Strategy and would help ensure that children of single parent households are not held back from reaching their potential by their circumstances.

**Societal Attitudes** – As discussed, attitudes towards single fathers can vary from ‘superman’ to a ‘violent risk.’ What we want is simply to be treated as parents who have the same skills and challenges that mothers do, whether single or not. Society is changing, and this will happen over time with or without the help of the Scottish Government. However, how many children will be denied access to their father or not benefit in ways that they could, while that slow change takes place? We feel it much more effective and beneficial to children to be proactive about shifting attitudes in the same way that government has been involved in addressing other forms of prejudice. This might happen through media campaigns or mandatory training for statutory services.

**Legal Issues** – While we do not consider ourselves legal experts, some of us have experience of how the best interests of children are protected through the Childrens Hearing system and the courts. We feel that despite the protection that exists on paper to ensure fathers’ rights and responsibilities are the same as mothers, this is too often not the case. We would like to see a greater effort made to acknowledge the importance of fathers to children in the decisions that get made. This might possibly need mandatory audits or reviews to ensure that children are being best served by the process.

- **Additionally**, we would like the Scottish Government to consider giving unmarried fathers automatic Parental Rights and Responsibilities in the same way that mothers are. We feel that this represents changes in our
culture, and placing equal expectations on fathers is an important societal and legal message for parents (married or not).

Because sexism has worked in favour of men for hundreds of years in many areas of life, the shifts that need to happen can sometimes feel counter to the ‘natural order of things.’ But research is clear that fathers represent an important part of children's development, and the population of children who do not have a fathers involved in their life are less likely to succeed than those who do. If Scotland wants to develop as a progressive society, with a vibrant economy, this is an important issue that needs addressed for the future. As a government, acting now will reap rewards for everyone in the future.

Brock Lueck
Lone Fathers Worker
On behalf of Dads’ Club
14 February 2014

**Project Description** - Edinburgh Lone Fathers Project is 13 years old and is co-managed by One Parent Families Scotland and Gilmerton Early Years Centre. As a major component of the project, Dads’ Club organizes free activities and outings for single fathers and their young children (under 5 years). This might be fathers who care for their children full time, or have contact with them a few hours a week. Every Saturday the Club does a range of things; Bookbugs sessions, Messy Play/Craft Sessions, swimming, adventure playgrounds and more. We believe that being a father is the most important job there is, and that dads are crucial to the development of young children. At Dads’ Club, there are opportunities to meet other single fathers while also giving the kids a chance to go to new places, and play with children of similar ages.

During the week the Lone Fathers Worker, Brock Lueck, also supports dads 1:1 (involved with the group and others) with issues such as parenting strategies, benefit advice, advocating, and support through the difficult process of maintaining contact with children following separation with a partner.

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