Purpose

To identify the key challenges single fathers and fathers with shared residence of children face in day-to-day life, and the quality of support currently available to them.

Context – Scotland-wide

From the 2011 Census we know that:

- There were 263,000 lone parent families (11 per cent of all households), of which nearly two thirds included dependent children;
- Out of the 170,000 lone parents aged 16 to 74 in Scotland in 2011, 92 per cent (156,000) were female; this was the same proportion as in 2001;
- In 2011, 64 per cent of male lone parents and 58 per cent of female lone parents aged 16 to 74 were in employment;
- Both the proportion of lone parents in employment, and the hours worked by those in employment, increased between 2001 and 2011.

From the Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics Midlothian summary report (13 November 2013) we know that:

- Lone parents of working age claiming income support and not in a higher statistical group (2012Q4) is 740.

Midlothian Council Area - research findings

A conversion was held between Midlothian Council’s Equality & Diversity lead officer and a Family Support Worker whose remit includes lone fathers and fathers with shared residence of children. Data and information gained is therefore from a service support perspective.

What day to day challenges do your clients experience as a lone/unmarried father in Midlothian?

A different set of rules apply to men and women with regard to mental health. If a women is suffering from say post natal depression then the need for support is identified and actioned. If a man is seen to be struggling then many consider ‘he is just not coping’ and support for the individual is at best limited. In other words men’s mental health issues are not acknowledged to the same extent as those of a woman. It is also important to say here that historically mental ill health in a man is often perceived by society to be a sign of weakness.

Many in society consider that lone fathers can’t provide good nutritious food for the children in their care – fried or carry out meals are considered to be the ‘norm’ in these households. Where a father may well be limited in his cooking skills the provision of a simple cook book can make a huge difference. This should not distract from the fact that many men can cook.

Family support (aunts and grandmothers) is essential. There are those in society who leap to the conclusion that a girl in a single male household may be disadvantaged in matters of puberty and
development, a feeling that many fathers feel is unfair. Lone fathers note that this challenge often comes from schools. (Fathers do not see any problem here.)

Do your clients experience any particular challenges in a specific aspect of their life for example, work, family, social?

Lone fathers/fathers with shared residence of children find that they are challenged when they ask to reduce the number of hours they work in order to look after their children. Society still places the role of breadwinner on the male, and lone fathers have found their employers and friends challenging why they would want to reduce working hours to look after children. These peer pressures can add to the challenges that fathers feel face, and many feel disempowered by this.

Other stereotypical difficulties fathers face is that there are those who are surprised that a father can keep a clean, neat and tidy home, and that they would want to attend nursery with younger children and be a part of their learning process.

In general terms universal services are totally geared up towards mum’s groups. A few father’s groups exist but they are the exception rather than the rule. Mothers quite happily go to mum’s groups held in libraries but these groups are suspicious and not entirely welcoming if a father attends.

Further single fathers find it very difficult to have a social life. It appears that little is thought of a single mother enjoying male company but when the roles are reversed many in society consider this is wrong and something that fathers should avoid irrespective of whether the relationship is platonic or otherwise.

Do your clients experience any particular challenges dealing with a specific subject for example: finance or dealing with access or care arrangements?

It was considered that the difference between male and female lone parents was not that great. However, a few differences were noted particularly that men were not as aware of what things cost and this could cause conflict between fathers and daughters in lone parent situations although not exclusively.

It was also considered that schools, nurseries, etc preferred to contact mums when situations arose. This arises from the fact that mums have always been the default contact. However, it is also true to say that if the school is advised that they should contact the dad, then they will make an effort to do so.

Further, men faced real anxiety when in custody of children that the mother might return wanting children back. As the courts usually award in favour of the mother men felt that were at a disadvantage should matters such a situation arise – services as well as the judicial system they feel are more biased towards the mother.

It was also considered that it would help if there was more of a gender mix in Social Services staff – at present it appears that there are more women than men.

What kinds of support and or services are available to you and do they meet your needs?

There are a few specific Fathers groups such as Midlothian Sure Start which lone fathers find most supportive. Midlothian Sure Start provides a dedicated Father’s group which looks to:

- Increase men’s confidence to support their partners during labour;
- Prepare and provide Fathers with knowledge and skills needed to care for, handle and to meet the basic needs of their newborns;
- Improve a father and child’s mental health and well-being;
- Reduce stress and anxieties in caring for newborn babies;
- Increase a father’s confidence and ability to take care of and nurture their babies;
- Make links with other agencies and services to provide ongoing support after birth; and
- Provide links for ‘Dads2B’ to access Sure Start programmes to support them in their parenting

These classes are for all men, not just lone fathers, and accordingly, afford the feeling of inclusivity.

**Do you feel that lone fathers get equal access to all types of public facilities when out with their children?**

No. It is still very much held view that fathers are the breadwinners and mothers look after the children. Further, as more mums care for children than Fathers in terms of budget provision it is not viable to target resources for lone Father-specific services.

**If you say that lone fathers experience challenges, what are your thoughts on public perceptions and general awareness of the issue?**

Statistically, (92% in 2011), mothers have the care of children. Services are predominately based on the mother being the main carer, and society not only accepts but defaults to this position. Accordingly, there is at best little if no real knowledge/understanding of the challenges and barriers faced by lone fathers.

Lesley Crozier
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14 March 2014