

Response to Child Maintenance Plans **6th April 2011**

By speaking to a range of young parents* the following issues were identified in terms of the difficulties with making 'family arrangements' for maintenance payments.

Parents who may experience problems include:

- parents with care who have lost contact with the ex partner
- parents with care who feel intimidated or threatened by the ex partner
- parents with care whose partner does not want to take any financial responsibility for the child
- parents with care who risk affecting the stability of contact between child and ex partner by discussing financial contributions
- parents with care who risk affecting the relationship between them and the ex partner by discussing financial contributions
- parents with care who have not had any involvement at all from the ex partner
- parents with care who cannot rely on an ex partner to stick to arrangements
- parents with care who have a volatile relationship with the ex partner
- parents with care who have a 'game playing' relationship with the ex partner

This response proposes that introducing charges to apply for CSA where family arrangements cannot be paid, double penalizes those families who are already vulnerable, particularly young mothers.

Who is affected?

Females are disproportionately affected

"Of the current statutory child maintenance service caseload, 95 per cent of parents with care are female. Results from the Families and Children Study suggest that for the overall eligible population the proportion of parents with care who are female is closer to 97 per cent" (p 9, EIA)

Teenage parents are disproportionately affected

According to data on pg 13 and 14 of the EIA, younger parents (under 20 and 20-24) are more likely to be eligible for CSA but less likely to be using it - more support needs to be available to encourage CSA claims for young parents who often need it most. Current plans of charging for the service will only make it more difficult. Young parents are more

* 'young parents' refers to parents who had their child at an early age, usually under 20.

likely to be living in poverty, more likely to lose contact with the ex-partner and more likely to have experienced domestic abuse (see notes).

Further issues

Support for those who have experienced domestic abuse

How will victims of domestic violence be assessed? Often this is private and sensitive. Does domestic violence included non-violent abuse? When does this need to have taken place and how can it be proved?

Support for young parents*

“From statutory maintenance service administrative data, there are very small numbers of such parents within the statutory service, with fewer than 200 parents with care under 18 and fewer than 30 non-resident parents. Nevertheless, the Government will consider appropriate treatment for these groups as policy proposals develop” (p14, EIA)

What about those who *were* parents under 18? Will appropriate treatment only apply if CSA application is completed before they turn 19? Will young parents, and organisations that represent young parents, be approached for consultation?

Closing of existing cases

Many parents with care have spent years and years contacting CSA and being passed around different call centres before payments are finally sorted. Closing of cases, after years of frustration, is likely to cause much distress to those who have been poorly treated by the system. It is considered unfair to expect these parents to attempt to contact the ex partner (who is likely to not want to pay by this stage, and may also owe arrears) or pay either £50 or £100 to reopen cases, particularly if money has already been spent on phone calls over years.

Some young parents* comments

“The fees are bad enough on their own, but “deductions on all payments as a ‘contribution to the state’ (around 30%)” amounts to the government stealing money from children. It smacks of collective punishment for failed relationships.

Personally, I have absolutely no hope of my ex coming to an agreement with me about maintenance. I only got the CSA involved as a last resort, and even then it took them a further six months to persuade him to part with any money. If the coalition gets it's way, my case will be closed and the money will be gone.”

“I personally have never contacted the CSA as my sons father has never bothered to work and never will (and apparently can get away with this up to the age of 38..!!). But if he did I simply could not afford to put in a claim to them under this new proposed system anyway. I have a few friends however that would not use the system if they did not need to. But

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therefore if they need to could they then afford to? Surely if this does go ahead, which I sincerely hope it does not, these charges should be applied to the estranged parent for not being willing to help towards of the cost of their child(ren) in the first place?!?! I think this is absurd and another way for the Government to make some money and quickly whilst penalising the most vulnerable in society..!!”

“They gave up searching for my ex after 2 weeks because apparently his home address, date of birth and full name wasn’t enough information, so they closed the case, and I cant afford £50 to reapply. That money is better spent on food for my son than chasing his useless dad”

“If you are asking them to track the father then obviously you need the money. How the hell are you meant to afford paying a fee? And taking money for the state”

“They should do more to make the fathers live up to their responsibilities. Surely if someone is asking for help from their ex it goes without saying that they may not be able to pay £100 for an application. Plus taking a % goes against what the money is there for - the child!”

“This confirms that the gov are just not part of the real world-enough parents already go without any maintenance for their children, and now that will be even more common-and it will be those who need it most affected cos they cant afford the charges! I thought this gov wanted to 'eradicate' child poverty not encourage it!”

“I haven’t seen or spoken to my ex in 4 years - since the day I phoned him to tell him I was pregnant, so trying to create an environment where families can come together isn’t going to work. The govt needs to realise that maintenance is there for the child not the care providing parent and that they should have no right to take any proportion of that money away from the child or to prevent parents in need from getting the help for their child because of making people have to pay for it. Then again what do I know I’m just a young mum”

“I didn’t have any other info on [child’s] dad apart from his name, d.o.b and family address, and because of my 'lack of information' they wouldn’t track him down so closed the case. Almost as if it was my own fault I didn’t know stupid info...”

I wouldnt be able to afford the £50 for being on benefits, thats like a week and half food shopping, which is why I get benefits in the first place - so I can feed [child] which is slightly more important than tracking down his useless excuse for a father”

Notes

*“Children whose parents are young (aged under 25) are more likely to be living in **severe poverty** than in non-severe poverty. Around 35% of children whose head of household is aged under 25 were living in severe poverty. The risks of both severe and non-severe poverty decline as the parents’ age increases” Save the Children, Measuring severe child poverty in the UK, January 2010*

The following stats are taken from the babycentre website <http://www.babycentre.co.uk/midwives/research-briefs/teenage-parents/>

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- Around thirty per cent of young mothers report having a stable relationship during their pregnancy and in the following three years, compared to nearly 90 per cent of older mothers (DCSF 2008).
- Although 66 per cent of births to mums under 20 are jointly registered, for 46 per cent of these births the father is resident at a different address (Hall and Hall 2007).
- Around a fifth of teenage fathers have never lived with their child, compared with six per cent of older fathers (DCSF 2007)
- Teenage mothers are more likely to have experienced domestic abuse than older mothers. In the Sure Start Plus national evaluation, 14 per cent of the teenagers interviewed disclosed that they had experienced domestic abuse during their current pregnancy (Wiggins et al 2005).
- Young parents often have unstable and volatile relationships with each other. Relationship problems between couples are a significant cause of stress during pregnancy, which can affect an unborn baby (DCSF 2008).
- The high rate of relationship breakdown between young parents is often followed by a loss of contact. Fathers commonly cite financial problems and conflict with the mother and her parents as reasons for this. Mothers are more likely to complain of fathers' disinterest, antisocial behaviour and substance abuse as reasons for seeking to exclude them from involvement with the child (Hall and Hall 2007).

For further info on young mothers:

<http://prymface.yolasite.com/>