

**Department for Work and Pensions**

**Research Report No 471**

# **Child Support Agency client insight research**

## **Main report**

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and Lisa Paton**

A report of research carried out by the PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP on behalf of  
the Department for Work and Pensions

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First Published 2008.

ISBN        978 1 84712 345 9

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# Acknowledgements

This study was commissioned by the Child Support Agency's (CSA's) Analytical Unit within the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The study team in PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) is grateful to all those who have contributed to this study, in particular, the clients of the CSA who participated in the research. We would also like to thank officials in the CSA's Analytical Unit for input and support throughout the research.

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# Abbreviations

<b>AA</b>	Administrative Assistant
<b>AO</b>	Administrative Officer
<b>BME</b>	Black Minority Ethnic
<b>C-MEC</b>	Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission
<b>CSA</b>	Child Support Agency
<b>DEO</b>	Deductions from Earnings Order
<b>DWP</b>	Department for Work and Pensions
<b>EO</b>	Executive Officer
<b>HMRC</b>	Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs
<b>HR</b>	Human Resources
<b>ISU</b>	International Survey Unit
<b>IT</b>	Information Technology
<b>JSA</b>	Jobseeker's Allowance
<b>NDPB</b>	Non-Departmental Public Body
<b>NRP</b>	Non-resident parent
<b>OIP</b>	Operational Improvement Plan
<b>PwC</b>	PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP
<b>PWC</b>	Parent with care
<b>Trans</b>	Clients on the transitional rules in CSA



# Glossary of terms

<b>Appeal</b>	A request by a Child Support Agency (CSA) client for a decision made by the Agency to be reviewed.
<b>Arrears</b>	Unpaid maintenance accrued as a debt.
<b>Assessed not charging</b>	Cases where a child maintenance application has been made, the case has been assessed and a positive maintenance assessment has been made, but no active charging schedule is currently in place.
<b>Assessed with a charge</b>	Cases where the child maintenance application has been made, the case has been assessed and a positive maintenance assessment has been made, and an active charging schedule is in place.
<b>Benefit intake client</b>	CSA clients who are in receipt of social security benefits (at the time of first contact with the CSA) and have been referred to the Agency through Jobcentre Plus.
<b>Case maintenance</b>	Whereby ongoing payments are made to the CSA by the non-resident parent (NRP) and once these are processed they are paid to the PWC.
<b>Collection service</b>	Cases where the NRP makes payments to the parent via the CSA collection service.
<b>Debt enforcement</b>	Procedures undertaken by the CSA to ensure payment of arrears and/or maintenance. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this does not include Legal Enforcement by the CSA because the data held by the CSA was not recorded in such a way that an accurate sample could be drawn.

<b>Jobcentre Plus</b>	This refers to CSA clients that have been referred to the Agency through Jobcentre Plus.
<b>Maintenance assessment/ calculation</b>	The amount that the CSA has calculated should be paid by a NRP to a PWC to contribute towards the upkeep of their child.
<b>Maintenance direct</b>	Cases where the NRP makes payments to the parent with care directly (as opposed to via the CSA collection service).
<b>New client</b>	Individuals who have submitted or been the subject of a child maintenance application, or have been referred by Jobcentre Plus to the Agency for a child maintenance application, but have not yet received a maintenance calculation, or have not paid or received the first payment on a positive maintenance calculation.
<b>New rules</b>	The CSA rules which operated post-March 2003.
<b>Nil assessed</b>	Cases where a child maintenance application has been made, an assessment has been calculated and there is no maintenance liability.
<b>No payment expected</b>	Cases which are assessed not charging, nil assessed or without calculation.
<b>Non-benefit intake client</b>	CSA clients who are employed or financially independent (at the time of first contact with the CSA).
<b>Non-resident parent</b>	The parent who lives in a separate household from the child or children for whom they pay child maintenance.
<b>Not paying</b>	Cases which are non-compliant.
<b>Old rules</b>	The CSA rules which operated prior to March 2003.
<b>Parent with care</b>	The parent who lives in the same household as the child or children for whom maintenance has been applied for/or is being paid.

**Paying**

Refers to cases which are fully compliant, partially compliant or maintenance direct.

**Transitional rules**

CSA clients in the process of moving from the old to the new rules.

**Without calculation**

This is where an application for child maintenance has been made but as yet there is no calculation on the case (information in order to calculate the maintenance amount is still to be collected or processed).



# Summary

## Background and context

The core business of the Child Support Agency (CSA), established in 1993, is to calculate and collect child maintenance from the parent who is not the main day-to-day carer of the child (the non-resident parent or NRP), and to ensure that it is paid to the parent who is the main day-to-day carer of the child (parent with care or PWC). In effect, the CSA oversees all aspects of this process and manages the related communications with both parents.

Late in 2006, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC) was commissioned by the CSA to undertake a client insight research study. The overall aim of the research was to understand better clients' experiences and perceptions of the service provided by the CSA at various touch-points, or stages, along the client journey.<sup>2</sup> The intention was that research would enable the Agency to improve its service provision to clients.

The child maintenance system is currently going through a period of rapid change. The CSA's Operational Improvement Plan (OIP) (February 2006), has been introduced to change the way the CSA delivers its services, with a much greater focus on ensuring NRPs fulfil their responsibility to pay maintenance, as well as putting in place more efficient, supportive and responsive processes.

These changes provide an important platform for the Government's proposed reforms to the child maintenance system as a whole. These were set out in a White Paper in December 2006, following recommendations from Sir David Henshaw

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<sup>2</sup> The CSA service consists of four aspects, namely: application and assessment, case maintenance, change in circumstances and enforcement. In addition, the research captured clients' experiences in terms of their more general interactions with the CSA, as well as the CSA's handling of complaints. The client journey refers to their engagement with the CSA and may include some but not all aspects of service. In the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), most of the clients surveyed have engaged with the CSA on just one or two aspects of service.

earlier that year. The changes include the creation of a new non-departmental body, the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (C-MEC), to take on responsibility for the delivery of the new child maintenance system, and also wide-ranging reforms to the policy framework. These reforms include giving parents more choice and support regarding their maintenance arrangements, and improving the way in which maintenance is collected, assessed and enforced.

The findings of this research report need to be considered in the context of these reforms. The Government's White Paper acknowledged that the child maintenance system has not lived up to expectations. It is important to note at the outset that some of the proposals contained in the White Paper (in particular the creation of C-MEC), as well as various initiatives within the OIP, should address many of the issues identified by clients within this report. Nevertheless, there are some important insights that should provide a useful focus for both the CSA, and eventually C-MEC, in the delivery of child maintenance.

## Research methods

The study involved an intensive programme of qualitative and quantitative research. Fifteen focus groups were conducted with 110 CSA clients across England, Scotland and Wales, to gather evidence on various aspects of the CSA client experience, and to inform the design of the quantitative survey. The quantitative research encompassed a national telephone survey with 4,006 CSA clients. The sample for the survey was constructed in order to capture recent client experiences with the Agency, and this was aided through specific routing through question modules.<sup>3</sup> The sample was also weighted to ensure it was representative of the CSA's client caseload as a whole. The data was collected during May and June 2007 and the responses given by CSA clients to the questions specifically refer to their experiences in the 12 months prior to the survey, approximately to the period between May 2006 and May 2007.

## Overview of key findings

### **Who are the CSA's clients?**

An important part of the research involved gaining an in-depth understanding of the profile and attributes of the CSA's clients, over and above that which can be ascertained from administrative records. In this context it was evident, firstly, that over half the clients surveyed had had no contact with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey taking place (approximately May 2006 to May

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<sup>3</sup> Where questions were asked only of clients that had particular experiences of elements of CSA service in the 12 months prior to the survey taking place (approximately May 2006 to May 2007).

2007).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in most instances, clients had only interacted with the CSA regarding one or two aspects of CSA service delivery, showing that the client journey does not necessarily include all aspects of CSA service.<sup>5</sup> This is important because the research shows that the extent of client dissatisfaction is correlated significantly with the extent of contact that clients have with the Agency (in that those with more contacts are generally less satisfied).

Secondly, the research showed that a substantial proportion of the client base had difficult relationship circumstances with the other parent. Nearly half of the clients (49 per cent) reported that they had either no contact or a poor relationship with their ex-partner. Allied to this, 46 per cent of clients reported that the NRPs had either irregular or no contact at all with their child/children. This is important because, as other parts of the research show, these personal circumstances have a strong bearing on the nature of the CSA client experience.

### **What matters most to CSA clients and how did they feel the CSA had performed?**

CSA clients were asked how important they felt various aspects of CSA service were that they had experienced in the 12 months prior to the survey taking place. On a scale of not very important to extremely important, each and every aspect of CSA service was considered important to CSA clients. The average 'importance scores', for each element of CSA service questioned, fell within a tight range of 4.4 to 4.9 (out of 5, where 5 was 'extremely important'). Within this, dealing with client complaints received the highest importance score, and handling the initial application and assessment process received the lowest score.

Based on a range of indicators,<sup>6</sup> around one half of CSA clients surveyed in the 12 months prior to the survey,<sup>7</sup> explicitly stated that they felt the CSA had not performed well across a wide range of service delivery aspects. This was reflected in clients' average rating of the CSA's performance, which was 2.7 out of 5.

The research also explored relative gaps between the importance of each aspect of CSA service (as assessed by clients), and the performance of the CSA at each of the

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<sup>4</sup> For the most part, the views of those clients (1,691) who had recent contact are the ones reported. This is in order to make the client experiences presented as relevant and up to date as possible.

<sup>5</sup> There are multiple pathways through the CSA service and this is driven by the circumstances of the case. In the context of this report, the client journey refers to all the elements of CSA service that can occur, although few clients surveyed (24) actually experienced interaction with the CSA in all elements over the 12-month period.

<sup>6</sup> Indicators were identified through the focus group research tested through the survey.

<sup>7</sup> Out of the overall sample of 4,006 clients, 1,691 clients (42 per cent) had had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey.

stages (again, as assessed by the clients)<sup>8</sup>. From this exercise, the CSA seemed to be falling short of client expectations at each stage. The largest performance gaps between importance and performance related to the debt enforcement stage, and dealing with complaints,<sup>9</sup> the smallest with case maintenance services.

### **What was the CSA client experience like?**

Only around one-third of clients who had been in touch with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey taking place (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), indicated that they were broadly satisfied with their experience of dealing with the Agency. The converse of this is that around two thirds of clients were broadly dissatisfied. This was reflected in an average client satisfaction score of 2.3 out of 5.

Clients were most positive about Agency performance regarding the application and assessment and case maintenance processes. The evidence suggests that those clients with experience of more than one aspect of service are less positive than those who had engaged with the Agency on one aspect of service only. For instance, in the quantitative survey, those clients who had engaged with the CSA regarding more than one aspect of service reported comparatively lower satisfaction scores than those who had a single service interaction. Similarly, in the focus groups, it was clear that an increasing number of clients experienced progressively more negative emotions as they moved through different elements of CSA service, particularly in the case of NRPs.

There were elements of CSA service delivery and its communications that clients rated more positively. Based on their experiences, the best performing were the communication process (e.g. treating information with care, treating clients with courtesy and respect and having suitable times and channels for contact) and also the case maintenance process (particularly timely collection and payment of maintenance).

By looking at the relationship between the CSA's performance (as assessed by clients) and client satisfaction, it is possible to identify aspects of CSA service delivery and communications in which improved performance could impact substantially on overall levels of customer satisfaction. The research results suggest that such areas include:

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<sup>8</sup> CSA clients were asked 'how important' a statement was and 'to what extent they agreed that they had received it'. Both of these scales were based on clients' perception and are not directly comparable. However, the 'gap' between the importance and performance was explored to indicate where performance was low against high client priorities.

<sup>9</sup> A small proportion of the overall sample had experience of enforcement and complaints and these clients mostly had complex personal profiles.

- the accuracy of actions taken by CSA employees – clients participating in the research often voiced concerns regarding accuracy of assessments, payments, change of circumstances and arrears calculations;
- responsiveness and timeliness in all aspects of CSA service provision – the CSA was perceived to be a remote and rather inaccessible service with many clients experiencing time delays, often leading to elements of frustration and anger; and
- linked to responsiveness, generally speaking, keeping clients informed about progress on their case, including queries lodged, was a significant issue for many clients.

### **Does the CSA client experience vary across different client groups?**

A critical factor to consider in interpreting the research relates to how the client experience varies across different client groups. It was evident that there were several client context factors which consistently affected the client experience more significantly than others, namely:

- client status as an NRP or PWC – with PWCs generally being more positive about their interactions than NRPs. There were pockets of relatively poor opinion among NRPs. Largely, these centred around case maintenance issues, the suitability of payment schedules, the accuracy of the payments, being treated with courtesy and respect and the CSA being sensitive to their needs;
- relationship with the other parent – parents who had poor relationships with each other, and those who had no contact at all, consistently rated the CSA's performance on application and assessment as comparatively low, and expressed particular dissatisfaction with the accuracy of the maintenance amount calculated<sup>10</sup>; and
- level of contact with the child or children – with, again, those who are in regular contact with their children having broadly more positive experiences of the Agency.

## Conclusions

This research has generated some very challenging feedback from clients in relation to CSA service delivery. Generally speaking, there were, at the time of the survey, high levels of dissatisfaction with the Agency amongst its clients, and the research has also identified a number of specific aspects of the service in which this dissatisfaction is most acute.

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<sup>10</sup> Those clients who were in arrears or who had made a complaint had larger proportions of clients with poor relationships with the other parent and have less/no contact with the child.

The CSA client experience is linked to contextual factors, and these, therefore, need to be accounted for when considering how to improve the service. However, profile characteristics in themselves do not provide a full explanation of the client experiences reported in this research. Indeed, correlation analysis suggests that how the service is delivered is a significant factor in shaping overall views of the service. This is substantiated by findings resulting from probing on reasons for satisfaction – those who were satisfied were so because, ‘they had had no problems with the CSA’, employees were helpful, polite and honest and the service was prompt. These are clearly service provision issues.

The implications are that there is a body of clients whose difficult personal context may in some way influence negative perceptions of the Agency and there will inevitably be high risk cases. However, some of those with difficult personal circumstances are also satisfied with the Agency. This suggests that potentially more high risk cases can be managed to produce a more positive experience for the client. This, linked to the fact that better service delivery is strongly related to a positive overall experience, suggests that improvements in service can yield a more positive client experience overall.

Finally, within this context, it is important to recognise that many of the challenges identified by clients in this research have already begun to be addressed through various initiatives outlined in the OIP, as well as the creation of C-MEC.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Context

### 1.1.1 Establishment of the CSA

The Child Support Agency (CSA) was established in 1993 to administer child maintenance. The principal role of the Agency is to help ensure that parents who live apart from their children contribute financially to their upkeep by paying child maintenance.

The Agency was established as the body responsible for administering the Child Support Scheme, which was one of the key outcomes of the 1991 Child Support Act. The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 introduced a scheme that came into force primarily for new cases from March 2003, based on the Child Support White Paper '*A New Contract for Welfare: Children's Rights and Parents' Responsibilities*'.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.1.2 Services provided to CSA clients

The role of the CSA is to calculate<sup>12</sup> and collect child maintenance from the parent who is not the main day-to-day carer of the child (the non-resident parent or NRP) and make sure it is paid to the parent or person who is the main day-to-day carer of the child (parent with care or PWC).

Essentially the CSA exists as a mechanism for channelling child maintenance between NRPs and PWCs and in this respect provides a service for both PWCs and NRPs.

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<sup>11</sup> Clients who applied to the CSA on or after 3 March 2003 are referred to as new rules clients. Those who applied prior to 3 March 2003 and have not subsequently been transferred to new rules, are referred to in this report as old rules clients. Just over one-half of the current caseload (52 per cent) remains under the old rules scheme (this includes those clients who are in transition between the old and new rules scheme).

<sup>12</sup> Note that under the old rules, CSA cases were 'assessed' whereas under new rules they are 'calculated'.

It should be noted that the PWC and NRP positions as clients are very different. The PWCs are ultimately the end client of the service in that they receive the child maintenance. Although NRPs are also considered to be clients, they act as part of the process in that they are the source of child maintenance funds.

In most cases the PWC is the mother and the NRP is the father.

There are two types of payment methods for child maintenance:

- **CSA collection service:** most parents living apart opt for the CSA collection service, a process where the CSA collects the maintenance from the NRP and then passes this onto the PWC; and
- **Maintenance Direct:** this is a method whereby the role of the CSA is limited to the initial calculation of the level of maintenance, which is then paid directly by the NRP to the PWC. After initial calculations the CSA only gets involved with the case again if requested by the PWC or NRP, for example, because changes in circumstances might require a new assessment or if the arrangement breaks down.

At the time of the survey (May – June 2007), the CSA was dealing with 1,359,900 client cases. The number of individuals that are clients of the Agency is larger than this figure, as each case can contain a PWC as well as at least one NRP. There is also the possibility that these individuals may also be linked to other CSA cases. In fulfilling its role to these individual clients, the Agency carries out the following tasks:

- calculating child maintenance payment.<sup>13</sup> The CSA's role is to calculate the maintenance which involves identifying and locating the NRP, confirming paternity, establishing the NRP's income or benefit status, determining the existence of children in the current household and confirming levels of shared care. The potential outcomes to the calculation process are the case being 'nil assessed' or 'assessed with a charge'. However, the case can have a number of statuses as it passes through this process and all of these are defined for the purposes of this report in Table 1.1. Once cases are live, the Agency has to keep all these factors up-to-date, track changes and recalculate maintenance each time any of the factors change;
- collecting and enforcing maintenance payments.<sup>14</sup> This involves setting up payment schedules for the transfer of child maintenance from NRP to PWC. Where payments are missed or debts have built up, the CSA is tasked with pursuing NRPs as far as possible to achieve payment; and

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<sup>13</sup> Even in cases where a Maintenance Direct system is in place (i.e. where the NRP makes payments to the PWC directly as opposed to via the CSA collection service) the CSA has a role to play in calculating the maintenance amount.

<sup>14</sup> This is where legal procedures are undertaken by the CSA to ensure payment of maintenance and/or arrears.

- paying maintenance to PWCs and retaining payments for the Secretary of State.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1.1 Potential case statuses during child maintenance application and assessment**

Outcome	Description
New client	An individual is the subject of a new child maintenance application, has submitted an application or has been referred by Jobcentre Plus to the Agency for a child maintenance application, but has not yet received a maintenance calculation, or has not paid or received the first payment.
Nil assessed	A child maintenance application has been made, an assessment has been calculated and there is no maintenance liability. This could occur where the NRP is a full-time student, in prison or living in a care home.
Assessed not charging	A child maintenance application has been made, the case has been assessed and a positive maintenance assessment has been made, but no active charging schedule is currently in place.
Assessed with a charge	A child maintenance application has been made, the case has been assessed and a positive maintenance assessment has been made, and an active charging schedule is in place. The outcome of such a case at any one time can be paying, not paying or cases where no payment is expected. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paying client cases are where the NRP has met all their current scheduled maintenance obligations by paying the full amount calculated as payable. Non paying client cases are where the NRP has not met any of their maintenance obligations over the last three months (and hence are in arrears). Clients with cases where no payment is expected are referred to as 'assessed not charging', 'nil assessed' or 'without calculation'.

### 1.1.3 The CSA client journey

This research examines client perceptions of the work of the Agency at various touch-points in their interactions with the Agency. The client journey refers to client engagement with the CSA and may include some, but not all, aspects of service. There are multiple pathways through the CSA service and this is driven by the circumstances of the case. Whilst it is not possible to present every example of where clients interact with the CSA in this introductory section, the research identified the key stages of interaction as set out overleaf.

<sup>15</sup> Note that while the redesign of the CSA is underway, a key 'client' of the CSA is also the government as the CSA is collecting money on behalf of the Secretary of State.

- **Application and assessment stage** – the first stage of the client contact with the Agency. There are two main routes through which clients can contact the CSA one relates to clients who are in receipt of social security benefits (known as benefit intake clients) who are referred automatically to the CSA by Jobcentre Plus and are obliged to arrange child maintenance through the CSA because they are in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. The other relates to those clients who are employed or financially independent (known as non-benefit intake clients) and as such, the clients contact the CSA directly to set up child maintenance arrangements. A PWC or an NRP may make an application to the CSA, however, in the vast majority of cases it is the PWC who makes the initial contact with the Agency. The client who applies is asked to provide sufficient basic information about the other parent to enable the CSA to contact them. Once information relating to NRP income/benefits and dependants has been collected, an assessment of child maintenance is calculated<sup>16</sup> at a rate determined by net weekly income, the number of children they currently have living with them, the number of children they must pay maintenance for, and whether the child in question stays with the NRP for at least one night per week. This stage incorporates what the CSA now refer to as 'Application or Referral and Gathering Information and Calculation'.
- **Case maintenance** – refers to CSA management of payments made to the CSA by the NRP and transfer of these payments to the PWC.
- **Change in circumstances** – on occasion a client may need to update their information due to something changing in their life such as moving house, re-marrying or changing employment;
- **Debt enforcement** – refers to activities undertaken by the CSA to pursue missed maintenance collections where an NRP has not met their maintenance obligations (for example, they may fail to pay the full maintenance amount or delay a payment according to the maintenance schedule agreed by the CSA) and be automatically routed through the debt enforcement process whereby the CSA actively pursues missed maintenance collections.<sup>17</sup>
- **Complaints** – a client can make a complaint to the CSA and enter into the Agency's complaints resolution process. Clients may also appeal decisions made by the Agency, and such decisions are then either revised by the Agency themselves or subject to independent review by the Tribunals service (part of the Department for Constitutional Affairs).

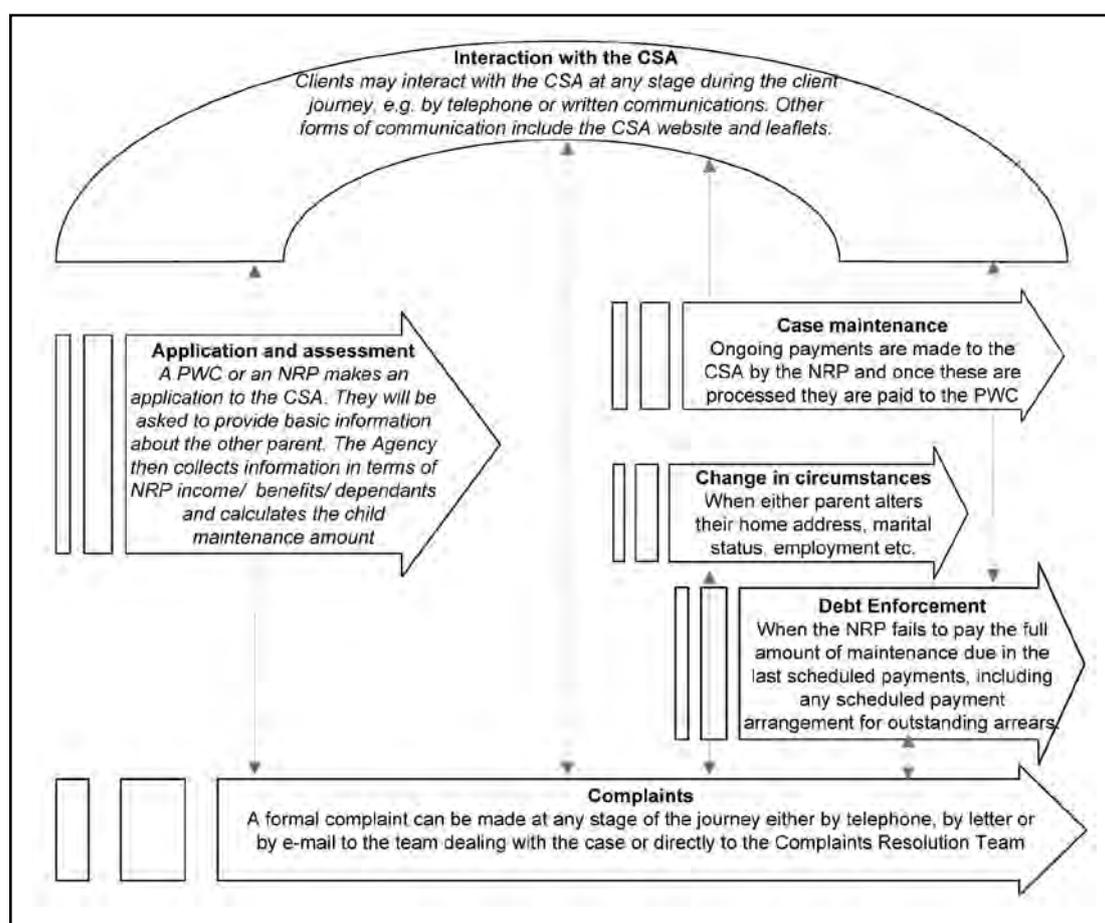
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<sup>16</sup> Under old rules CSA cases were 'assessed' whereas under new rules they are 'calculated'. However, for consistency throughout this report we have referred to the 'application and assessment' as the first stage of the client journey.

<sup>17</sup> Note that this does not include Legal Enforcement by the CSA because the data held by the CSA was not recorded in such a way that an accurate sample could be drawn.

Underpinning these service delivery stages are the more intangible elements of service provision described as 'interaction with the CSA'. This encapsulates issues pertaining to communication between clients and the CSA, how employees engage with clients and the ability of the CSA to bring their expertise in managing child maintenance to bear on client cases. The full range of service provision and possible client contact is summarised in Figure 1.1.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 1.1 Key elements of CSA service provision**



#### 1.1.4 The CSA's Operational Improvement Plan

The CSA's Operational Improvement Plan (OIP)<sup>19</sup> was announced by the Secretary of State in February 2006. Its aim is to change the way the Agency delivers its services to provide a much stronger focus on responsibility from NRPs, more

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that since this research was completed, the CSA's Marketing and Communications division has developed materials about the client journey and describe the journey in five key stages as follow: Stage 1 information and guidance, Stage 2 application or referral, Stage 3 gathering information and calculation, Stage 4 payment and Stage 5 enforcement.

<sup>19</sup> CSA (2006) Child Support Agency Operational Improvement Plan 2006-2009. London: CSA.

money for children, delivery that is more efficient and effective, a supportive and responsive service and a mechanism to reduce child poverty. As the foreword in the OIP by the CSA Chief Executive explains:

*'The underlying causes of the problems with the CSA's current performance are deep rooted and complex. They reflect not only the operational and IT system issues which have accumulated over the 13 years the Agency has existed, but also the complexity and instability of modern relationships. The conflicts and emotions generated when relationships break down add further difficulties.'*

Source: CSA (2006) Operational Improvement Plan 2006-2009

In order to deliver these aims, the OIP has established a number of key actions (Table 1.2). Furthermore, in a move towards implementing elements of the OIP, the CSA has recently restructured its operating model. In particular, it has increased the allocation of senior grade employees to more complex parts of CSA service provision. It is intended that this operating model will provide the framework for improved service provision.

**Table 1.2 Operational Improvement Plan – key actions for improved service delivery**

<p><b>Getting it right:</b> Gathering information and assessing applications</p>	<p>There are currently uncleared applications which have not yet been assessed and there is a need for the CSA to improve the efficiency and accuracy of the assessment process. In addition the CSA aims to increase employee productivity, working more closely with Her Majesty's Revenue &amp; Customs (HMRC) to trace NRPs and seek to minimise the impact of time required for this task on assessment processes, introducing senior caseworkers to deal with more complex cases and improving communication, specifically around the assessment process to help clients understand how they can help the CSA assess their case.</p>
<p><b>Keeping it right:</b> Active case management</p>	<p>In response to the challenges of securing and maintaining payments, the Agency is increasing the use and effectiveness of Deductions from Earnings Orders (DEOs) and extending the range of payment options. The responsiveness and accessibility of the organisation will be improved by having senior case workers involved in complex cases, improving telephony systems to allow clients to get through and making improved efforts to keep clients informed of the progress on their case to date.</p>

Continued

**Table 1.2 Continued**

<p><b>Putting it right:</b> Enforcing responsibilities</p>	<p>Considerable debt has accrued since the Agency's inception in 1993 as a result of NRPs' failure to pay. Nearly one in three NRPs who have been assessed have failed to pay. It is intended that this situation will be managed through increasing the focus on payment and debt enforcement by fully using the existing range of sanctions such as driving licence removal and imprisonment and increasing the number of cases brought to court for non-payment.</p>
<p><b>Getting the best:</b> From the organisation</p>	<p>To improve the productivity and efficiency of the organisation as a whole, the CSA has changed its operational infrastructure to reflect the progression from application and referral, through case management and to debt enforcement, if appropriate. In addition, more resources are being made available to focus on case progression. The long-standing IT issues faced by the organisation are being addressed in conjunction with their supplier.</p>

Source: CSA Operational Improvement Plan (2006-2009), February 2006.

### 1.1.5 Reform of the child maintenance system

Alongside the OIP, the Secretary of State asked Sir David Henshaw to develop proposals to redesign the child maintenance system. His report *'Recovering child support: routes to responsibility'*<sup>20</sup> recommended that both child maintenance policy and the way it is delivered needed to change significantly. His main recommendation was to establish a system that allows parents to make their own maintenance arrangements, and where this is not possible, a more effective process for assessing, collecting and enforcing payments. He also suggested that Government may wish to consider the pros and cons of creating a new organisation with Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) status. The Government accepted the vast majority of his recommendations and in December 2006 published a White Paper outlining its proposals, including the establishment of a new organisation to manage child maintenance – the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (C-MEC).<sup>21</sup>

In June 2007, a Bill<sup>22</sup> was published to reform the policy and delivery of child maintenance. In summary, measures include:

- establishing C-MEC to administer child maintenance and replace the CSA;
- encouraging parents to make their own child maintenance arrangements and giving them more choice about how they do so;

<sup>20</sup> Henshaw, Sir D. (2006) *Recovering child support: routes to responsibility*. London: HMSO.

<sup>21</sup> DWP (2006) *A new system of child maintenance*. London: HMSO.

<sup>22</sup> The House of Commons (2007) *Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill*, Bill 118, 5 June 2007.

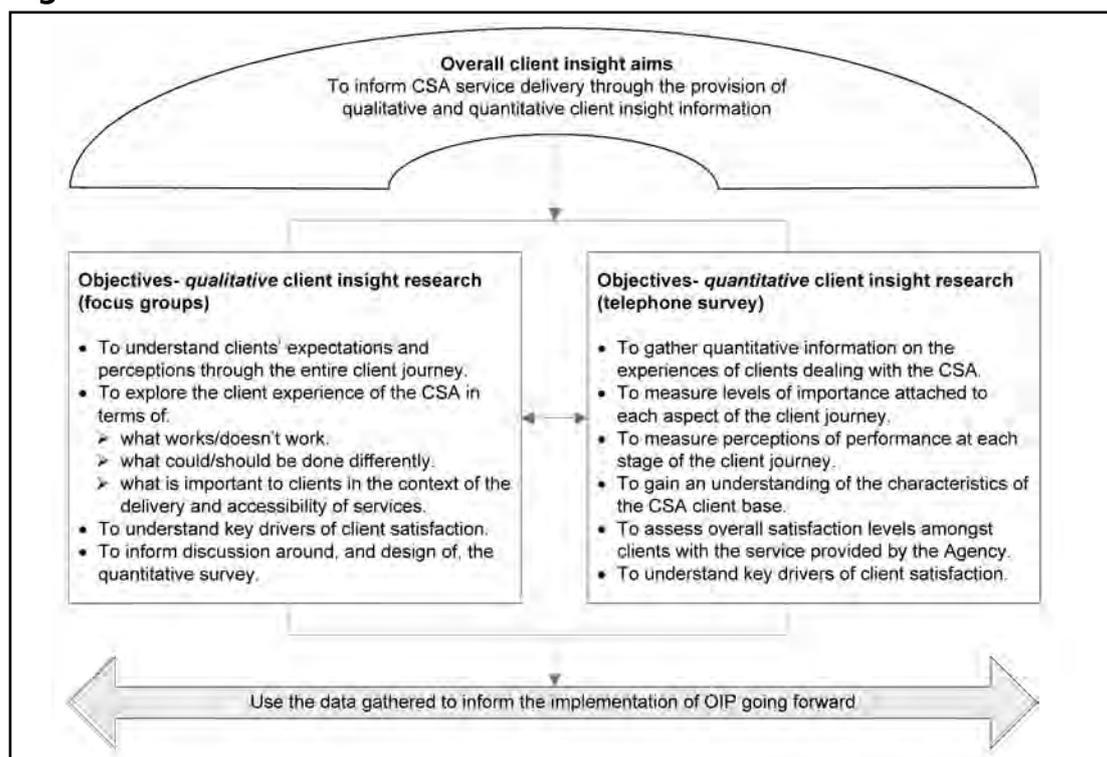
- streamlining and simplifying how child maintenance is calculated, enabling money to get to more children more quickly;
- introducing tougher debt enforcement powers to collect arrears<sup>23</sup> of child maintenance from parents who fail to pay; and
- introducing powers to collect and reduce child maintenance debt more effectively.

## 1.2 Terms of reference

During this time of change within the CSA, it is important that the organisation understands its clients, who they are and how they experience the service provided. The CSA recognised that there was an urgent need for client insight research to provide policy makers and strategic managers with the information and detail required to understand the business, the impact the change programme is having on the delivery of its services, and whether it is meeting the needs of its clients.

In this context, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP was commissioned in November 2006 to undertake a major client insight research study for the CSA as part of a wider programme of client research that is being undertaken. The research commissioned by the Agency involved two inter-related strands, namely, a qualitative exercise involving focus groups with CSA clients and a quantitative exercise involving a large scale telephone survey of CSA clients (Figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.2 Terms of reference for CSA client research**



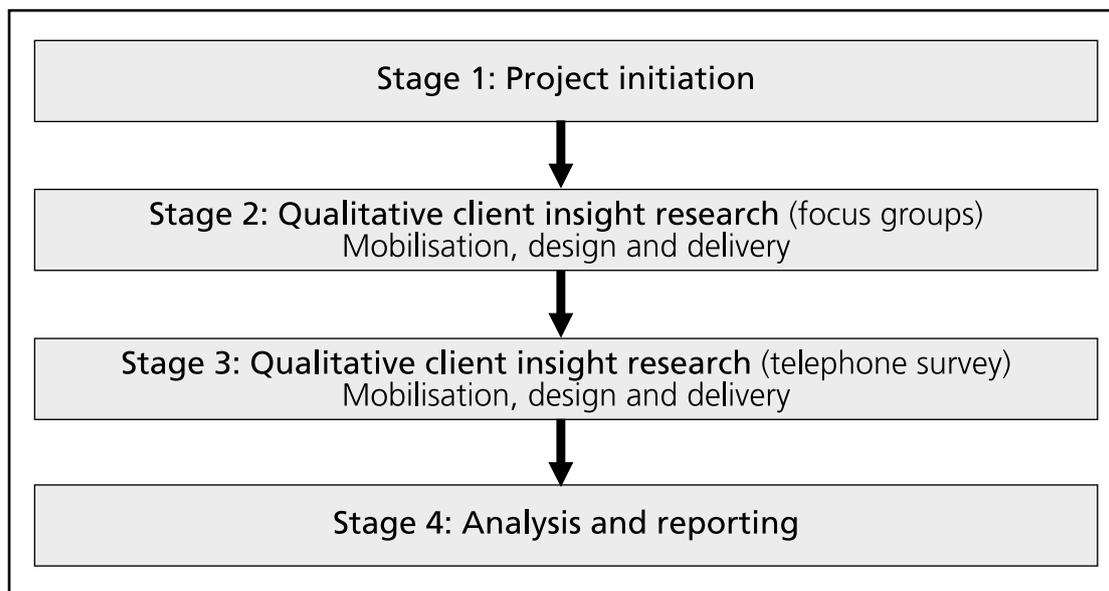
<sup>23</sup> Unpaid maintenance accrued as a debt.

## 1.3 Methodology

### 1.3.1 Overview of the methodology

The methodology for the research, as illustrated in Figure 1.3, consisted of four key stages:

**Figure 1.3 Overview of methodological approach**



### 1.3.2 Stage 1: Project initiation

At the outset, a number of meetings and discussions were held with the CSA to confirm requirements, agree timescales and discuss in detail the type of information sought and the nature of analysis and final outputs. This also involved a review of CSA literature including previous research exploring client attitudes to the CSA.

### 1.3.3 Stage 2: Qualitative client insight research – focus groups

Fifteen focus groups were held with a broad spectrum of CSA clients across England, Scotland and Wales.

The research design phase involved a number of key tasks:

- **development of a participant matrix:** a matrix was developed to ensure a broad representation of clients at the focus groups and guide recruitment of individuals. In selecting clients a number of variables<sup>24</sup> which may influence views and opinions of service provision were considered such as client type (PWC/NRP), intake type (i.e. benefit and non-benefit clients<sup>25</sup>), CSA old rules and new rules<sup>26</sup> clients, geographical location and clients who had accessed various specific elements of the CSA service, e.g. complaints;
- **recruitment of participants:** opt-out letters were sent to a number of CSA clients for each focus group explaining the purpose and nature of the research and detailing the timetable within which they might be contacted for participation<sup>27</sup> and providing the opportunity to withdraw from the research. These letters are followed by telephone recruitment; and
- **design of focus group topic guide:** this was designed to ascertain clients' experience and opinions of the Agency in relation to their client journey, overall satisfaction with the Agency and suggestions for improvement summarised in Table 1.3. The focus groups themselves included implementation of a number of projective and enabling techniques<sup>28</sup> to stimulate discussion in the groups.

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<sup>24</sup> Clients were selected using variables relevant to their circumstances at the time of the focus groups. This means that some clients who are currently noted as being on benefits may have been private clients prior to their current benefit status (e.g. at the time of case application or referral) and this is sometimes reflected in the discussion.

<sup>25</sup> Benefit claimants are compelled to use the Agency to seek child maintenance payments and their initial contact point is Jobcentre Plus. Those clients not claiming benefits are categorised as private and their contact with the CSA is direct.

<sup>26</sup> Old rules clients refers to those who have had their child maintenance arranged and managed under the legislation in place before 3 March 2003 whereas new rules clients are those operating under the legislation in place on or after 3 March 2003.

<sup>27</sup> See copies of the focus group opt-out letter and invitation letter in Instrument B.1 and B.2 in Appendix B.

<sup>28</sup> For example psycho-drawings and role-plays.

**Table 1.3 Summary of the focus group topic guide<sup>29</sup>**

Overview of experiences	Inviting participants to create and explain a visual image of their perception of their experiences of dealing with the Agency ('psycho-drawings').
Initial insights	Participants were asked to act out a live television interview in which they had a one-minute slot to outline the main stages in their journey with the CSA ('role play').
Application and assessment	Investigating views on aspects of the application and assessment stage, such as initial expectations of the agency and the extent to which these expectations were met, and views of the types of information clients are requested to provide at this stage of the journey.
Establishment of payment arrangements (including missed payments and debts)	Asking participants to express their view of the suitability of payment schedules, any problems encountered at this stage of the journey and any action taken to rectify such problems. Also investigating compliance status, awareness of the consequences of non-payment, and the factors motivating payment and non-payment.
Debt enforcement	Accessing views on how the CSA managed the collection and payment of arrears for both PWCs and NRPs, including the impact of missed payments on PWCs and the impact of debt enforcement procedures on NRPs.
Case maintenance	Looking at the evolution of participants' maintenance arrangements, including missed payments, changes in circumstances and the impact of such occurrences on both PWCs and NRPs.
Complaints and appeals	Investigating client views on the CSA complaints process, from making a formal complaint, through the handling and resolution of complaints, and on to the appeals process.
Overall satisfaction with the CSA	While satisfaction was assessed at each of the aspects of service that clients may experience as part of their client journey, this part of the guide afforded the opportunity to examine satisfaction levels overall and to investigate key satisfaction drivers.

The focus groups were held in five locations (London, Bristol, Manchester, Cardiff and Edinburgh). A total of 110 CSA clients attended with a broad representation in terms of age, gender (some female NRPs were in attendance), socio-economic groups and ethnicity as shown in Table 1.4.

<sup>29</sup> See the full focus group topic guide in Instrument B.3 in Appendix B.

**Table 1.4 Summary of focus group attendees<sup>30</sup>**

Type of client	Type of rules		Number of participants
	Old	New	
PWC benefits	Edinburgh	Bristol/Manchester	28
PWC non-benefit	Bristol/London	Cardiff	24
NRP benefits	n/a	Edinburgh/Bristol	15
NRP non-benefit	Cardiff/Manchester	London	24
Complaints	London (2 mini-groups – 1 x PWC, 1 x NRP)		12
Debt enforcement	London (2 mini-groups – 1 x PWC, 1 x NRP)		7
<b>Total</b>			<b>110</b>

### 1.3.4 Stage 3: Quantitative client insight research – telephone survey

Building on the findings of the qualitative research, the quantitative strand of the research consisted of a large scale telephone survey of over 4,000 CSA clients to measure and benchmark client opinions of, and satisfaction with, CSA service provision. In addition, data was gathered to help the CSA better understand their client base, e.g. the extent of their contact with the child and the relationship status between PWCs and NRPs. Each of the tasks involved in the survey are set out below.

The design of the survey involved the following stages:

- **design workshop:** this was held to bring staff from PricewaterhouseCoopers and the CSA together to agree the sample frame and questionnaire content;
- **development of a client experience model:** the model was based on evidence gathered in the focus groups and provided a framework for design and development of the quantitative research. The model is discussed further in Chapter 2;

<sup>30</sup> See further details of focus group recruitment and attendance in Table A.1 in Appendix A.

- **sample frame:** a quota<sup>31</sup>-based approach to sampling was adopted to achieve a statistically representative sample of CSA clients with regard to caseload characteristics such as rules type, client type, intake type, compliance status and payment type.<sup>32</sup> A sample size of 4,000 respondents was agreed to minimise margin of error and also to provide results which could be readily and reliably analysed in terms of sub-groups; and
- **questionnaire design and piloting:** based upon the information needs of the Agency and informed by the findings of the focus group research, a questionnaire was designed and agreed upon. This incorporated importance, performance and satisfaction measures. It was structured around the various elements of service a client may experience, to allow insights into expectation and satisfaction at each stage. The survey was piloted across 29 clients and subsequently refined. A summary of the questionnaire content is presented in Table 1.5.<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that the responses to the questions in the quantitative survey relate to the different elements of CSA service that the clients had experienced in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007). In this study it was not possible to follow a cohort of clients who experienced all elements of the CSA service during the given timeframe, as this would have been too resource and sample intensive. Instead, a sample of clients was selected and they were asked questions in relation to elements of the CSA's services that they had experienced during the 12 months prior to the survey. This also provided insight into the extent to which the caseload of clients and the CSA were engaged.

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<sup>31</sup> Quota sampling involves stratifying the population by the important variables and obtaining the required quota from each stratum. There is a stronger possibility of bias as selection is not random and it is difficult to estimate the accuracy of the quota sample. This method was chosen to ensure that all groups included sufficiently robust numbers to support sub-group analysis.

<sup>32</sup> In other words whether the client interacts with the agency on a Maintenance Direct or a collection service basis.

<sup>33</sup> See a copy of the full questionnaire in Instrument C.1 in Appendix C.

**Table 1.5 Structure of the questionnaire**

Application and assessment	Covering client views on aspects relating to the application and assessment process such as views on the timeliness and accuracy with which the CSA dealt with this process.
Case maintenance	Focusing on issues pertaining to payment management such as views on the payment/maintenance schedule, timeliness of payments/maintenance collections and rectifying any problems with payments/maintenance collections.
Debt enforcement	Understanding views on how the CSA managed the payment of arrears for both PWCs and NRPs such as actions to reduce arrears.
Changes in circumstances	Affording clients the opportunity to express views on how any changes in their personal circumstances were managed by the CSA and the impact of these changes on their payments/maintenance collections.
Complaints	Seeking to understand client views on how the CSA deals with and manages their complaints, including views on how well the CSA understood the complaint and views on the resolution reached.
Interaction with the CSA	Exploring client views of a variety of aspects of direct communication (face-to-face or telephone) as well as views on indirect communications (written and web-based). Also exploring the relationship between the client and the CSA and clients' views on the level of expertise offered by the CSA.
Overall satisfaction	Covering satisfaction with the maintenance amount calculated, with the CSA management of maintenance arrangements and with CSA service overall.
Profile of respondents	Gathering information on ethnicity, impairment, previous and current relationship with the other parent, level of NRP contact with the child/children and current relationship status.

In total 4,006 interviews were achieved as shown in Table 1.6. The answers provided to the questions related to the experiences of the CSA that individual clients had during the 12 months preceding the survey. The fieldwork for the survey ran between May and June 2007 and therefore, when exploring these findings, the timeframe applied to the experiences are approximated to be between May 2006 and May 2007. The number of respondents to each of the questions varied considerably throughout the fieldwork and this was due to complex routing of the questionnaire. The routing ensured that only those who had recent experience of CSA service were asked about it, providing the most relevant evidence available.

**Table 1.6 Summary of interviews conducted**

	PWC	NRP	Total
Benefits new	633	567	1,200
Benefits old	371	374	745
Non-benefit new	623	682	1,305
Non-benefit old	3	3	6
Unknown <sup>1</sup>	376	374	750
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,006</b>	<b>2,000</b>	<b>4,006</b>

<sup>1</sup> Cases referred to as unknown refer to old rules cases where up-to-date information on employment status is not held by the CSA.

The data were weighted to ensure they were fully representative of the population of CSA clients (see Table A.3 in Appendix A for further details), and the percentages presented in the data tables throughout the report relate to the weighted figures, unless otherwise stated.

### 1.3.5 Stage 4: Analysis and reporting

The findings from both the focus groups and the telephone survey<sup>34</sup> were analysed to form this report. The analytical techniques used for the focus groups and survey are presented in Table 1.7.

**Table 1.7 Summary of key implementation and analytical techniques**

Element of the research	Technique	Application
Focus groups	Artistic representation	Participants were asked to draw how they would describe their experience of the CSA – their pictures are described in Chapter 2.
	Role play	Participants had a one minute slot to outline the main stages in their journey with the CSA.
	Thematic content analysis	Mapping views and opinions arising across the focus groups to the main topics set out for discussion. Key themes emerging were drawn out with regard to the research questions along with looking for commonalities and differences across participant types.

Continued

<sup>34</sup> See further details on the weighting of the survey results in Table A.3 in Appendix A.

**Table 1.7 Continued**

<b>Element of the research</b>	<b>Technique</b>	<b>Application</b>
Survey	Mean scores	Importance scores were calculated by allocating a value between 1 and 5 (where 1 is the lowest importance and 5 is the highest importance according to the five-point scale used in the questionnaire) to all responses. A mean score is then calculated to allow importance to be considered as a single score across all responses. The same process was used with agreement scales to produce a performance score and with satisfaction scales to produce a satisfaction score.
	Cross-tabulations	Cross-tabulation of responses with key case information such as client type, rules type, compliance status, etc. and also with profile information such as ethnicity and level of impairment.
	Correlations	Described the degree to which one variable is linearly related to another, i.e. to measure the degree of association between two variables.
	Gap analysis	The mean figures for importance and performance were calculated using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is for 'not important at all' and 5 is for 'extremely important' and 1 is for 'weak performance' and 5 signifies 'strong performance'. The variance between the score for importance and performance scores were calculated. This technique identified areas of service where there is a significant difference between client expectations and client perceptions of service delivered, thus highlighting the degree to which client expectations are being met. This also assisted in identifying service gaps in terms of focusing on areas where services need to be enhanced.

The purpose of this report is to gather information relating to the client perspective. To this end analysis of the results and reporting thereof reflects the client view and presents their views on importance, performance and satisfaction.

## 1.4 Structure of the report

The research findings have been presented in two volumes, with this being one and the Appendices being in another. This volume is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: Focus group findings;
- Chapter 3: Profile of CSA clients;
- Chapter 4: Application and assessment;

- Chapter 5: Case maintenance;
- Chapter 6: Debt enforcement;
- Chapter 7: Change in circumstances;
- Chapter 8: Complaints;
- Chapter 9: Interaction with the CSA;
- Chapter 10: A summary view of client experience;
- Chapter 11: Exploring the impact of the client context on client experience;  
and
- Chapter 12: Conclusions.

There are four appendices which provide detailed information on the methodology, research instruments and further technical tables which seek to complement the main findings presented in this volume. The appendices are structured as follows:

- Appendix A: Detailed tables to support the methodology;
- Appendix B: Research instruments for the focus groups;
- Appendix C: Survey questionnaire; and
- Appendix D: Additional statistical information.



## 2 Focus group findings

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of the focus group research was firstly, to understand client expectations and perceptions of Child Support Agency (CSA) service delivery including what works/doesn't work, what could/should be done differently and what is important to clients in the context of service delivery. Secondly, the focus groups aimed to understand the nature and influence of attributes underpinning a positive/negative client experience and to use this in conjunction with views on experience to inform the design of the larger programme of quantitative survey research.

This chapter presents the findings arising from the focus group research in relation to client experiences of engaging with the CSA. It contains two main sections as follows:

- experiences of CSA service delivery; and
- lessons for future client insight research.

### 2.2 Experiences of Child Support Agency service delivery

This section provides an overview of client experiences of CSA service delivery as described in the introductory chapter of this report. These findings represent the views of the focus group participants. It comprises the following sections:

- initial touch-points with the CSA;
- client experiences of case management;
- debt enforcement;
- dealing with clients' complaints; and
- communication and relationship channels.

### 2.2.1 Initial touch-points with the CSA

#### *Initial client reactions to becoming involved with the Agency*

A number of parents with care (PWCs) across the groups were optimistic about their involvement with the CSA due to the prospect of receiving maintenance to support their children. They were also happy to provide the CSA with the required information about the non-resident parent (NRP).

*'Yes, if you want them to support you and support your children in their rights to that parental contribution it's fair enough that you should co-operate with them [give them information].'*

(PWC, Benefit, New Rule)

However, many participants also reported having been in a very negative state of mind due to the emotional and practical difficulties faced as a result of the relationship breakdown:

*'I felt really uncomfortable. On the one hand you'd like to receive some money to help support your child. But you know the problems we'd had - in another way I just didn't want to have anything to do with him. And I did feel kind of invaded by having to provide information about him. So I was just scared of what he might do.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

This was to the extent that in some cases the PWCs were concerned that their involvement with the CSA would necessitate contact with the NRP. They believed that the resulting contact would lead to the NRP having access to the children:

*'I just don't want to know their dads. They were both domestic violence. I don't want the CSA letting them know where I am. We have moved God knows how many times and they want my details and his details so that they can get money from him.'*

(PWC, Benefit, New Rule)

Many NRPs were paying maintenance informally and felt assured that this was a satisfactory arrangement until the CSA contacted them. At that point a minority were aware that in benefit cases their ex-partners were obliged to use the CSA, and the majority felt that their ex-partners were taking advantage of them. Many felt that they had made sacrifices that they were happy to make for the benefit of their children, but that these were not recognised by their ex-partners or by the CSA:

*'My ex called them even though I was giving her the money in her hand, even though I was paying her each month, she wanted more money, I said I have no more money to give you even though I gave her the car, the house, I am not going to argue over it, the kids need somewhere to live, I'll just sign over the house to you and walk away with nothing, she got onto the CSA for more money, and the first thing I knew about it was when a letter came through the door, "you need to pay for that.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

*'I think a phone call first, I don't know how they got the number, I ignored at first but they are persistent. Then it was a government office and the shock was "what do they want". Then it was followed by the brown envelope and getting you to fill out all the forms and send back. My dealings with them, I didn't think I was going to be paying out more than I would be paying for other children so I filled out the form very cooperatively because this is what the mother has decided to do. She must be living beyond her means, if she wasn't hard up the CSA wouldn't be involved, but that is giving her the benefit of the doubt maybe there are ulterior motives.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, New Rule)

In addition, many NRPs were worried about the financial consequences and wider implications of the CSA becoming involved. In particular, many were concerned that the CSA's involvement did not adversely impact on what they perceived to be satisfactory private arrangements.<sup>35</sup>

*'My main beef is that the CSA have no regard for any private agreements... It is completely impersonal, they don't really look at things.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, New Rule)

*'I ended up with the CSA without any idea or any knowledge of what it was going to do. When I separated from my wife...we had an arrangement which she opted out of and I decided to take some responsibility...I then get this envelope from the CSA...the law wasn't clear, it wasn't clear as to who was responsible for what, and then all of a sudden they started chasing me and I started asking her...So what was a nice and amicable relationship became a very tense relationship...They kind of created a whole atmosphere of suspicion and mystique into the whole thing...And then what about all this money that I have been spending, and they say "well you need to keep a record" but that is like ridiculous, I do all the shopping and get groceries and then all of a sudden I need to start saving records...so they just created an atmosphere of crisis more or less.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, New Rule)

*'My wife took me to court because I wasn't paying, well as I've said my priority was my mortgage, as business was going away and technology kept moving away...They were totally inflexible about it, they weren't interested at all. I was sending them my accounts...I hadn't got the money to either pay or invest in the business, and I had something to sell so I had to sell [the business].'*

(NRP, Benefit, New Rule)

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<sup>35</sup> Under the child maintenance policy redesign, by the end of 2008, the requirement that PWCs claiming benefit be treated as applying for child maintenance will be removed. This will allow parents to take responsibility for making their own maintenance arrangements in a way which suits them and their children best.

### *Client understanding of the application and assessment process*

The majority of PWC non-benefit clients approached the CSA by telephone<sup>36</sup> for assistance and could recall having received and completed an application form. In the case of PWC benefit clients, this process largely took place via Jobcentre Plus. Both PWCs and NRPs alike could recall having been asked to provide the CSA with information. In the case of PWCs this involved information about themselves, their children and the NRP, such as address, National Insurance number, place of work and income details. NRPs were only asked to provide information about themselves; this was largely income- and expenditure-related and involved sending documentation to the Agency. For the most part, the information gathering process was done using CSA forms that clients had been sent. In some cases, telephone contact took place where clients had concerns about supplying information or where the CSA identified gaps or a requirement for further information.

This ability to recall initial steps with the Agency shows that the initial application and information gathering stage was understood by clients and it was recognised that these processes were a necessary first step in the overall system. However, some frustrations were expressed by PWCs regarding the extent of information to be provided by them and the apparent inability of the Agency to source information from across Government on NRPs – this is also relevant to other parts of the CSA service and is explored more fully in later paragraphs.<sup>37</sup>

With regard to assessment, the majority of participants could recall having received a letter or statement outlining the maintenance amount that they would be paying or receiving.<sup>38</sup> Some could also recall having received supporting explanatory documentation. A number of PWC benefit client participants were not aware of having received information about the maintenance amount. At this stage, nearly all the telephone contact that occurred had been initiated by clients where they had concerns regarding assessment criteria and maintenance amounts<sup>39</sup>.

However, generally speaking, there was confusion among a number of focus group participants regarding how the maintenance figure was calculated and why, in some cases, the amount and frequency of payments varied. NRP participants

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<sup>36</sup> Wikeley *et al.* (2001) also conclude that in terms of client-initiated contact with the CSA, more clients (whether NRPs or PWCs) had telephoned rather than written to the CSA.

<sup>37</sup> At present (November 2007), the Government is examining ways in which Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (C-MEC) can work more closely with Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC) and use tax data to make maintenance calculations.

<sup>38</sup> Again, this is consistent with the quantitative information presented in Wikeley *et al.* (2001).

<sup>39</sup> As part of the Agency's Operational Improvement Plan (OIP), the CSA is encouraging its employees to adopt a telephone culture for client contact rather than one based on written communications.

in particular were confused – some did not understand how the figure had been calculated and those that did were unaware of the rationale behind the formula used.<sup>40</sup> On the whole, NRPs participating in the focus groups were angry as they did not consider the assessment to be fair and amounts were thought to be excessive. NRPs often felt ignored by what they perceived to be the CSA's lack of recognition of individual circumstances – for example, financial outgoings and support already being provided to the children<sup>41</sup>:

*'I don't know enough about how the calculations are done, or what information they've got, or what information they've got from him, so you feel pretty blind and I think in the whole thing, there's a massive lack of information.'*

(PWC, Complaints)

*'The calculation slides but it is a flat line calculation because when you are earning £30, £40 or £50k it is just a straight proportion but when you get down to the lower end, as the situation we are in, the money becomes a lot more important, the pennies become a lot more important. There is no flexibility at the bottom end when the money really counts, when you are struggling to feed yourself, pay bills and things like that.'*

(NRP, Benefit, New Rule)

Quite a large number of participants reported significant time delays in their maintenance being calculated and continuous problems with payments, particularly

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<sup>40</sup> This finding is consistent with another Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) research report by Bell *et al.* (2006) which states that a large proportion of 'newly assessed NRPs on child maintenance reported not understanding the assessment very well or at all'. Wikeley *et al.* (2001) also report that 'most parents told us that they did not understand how the CSA calculated the assessment figure in their case'. Improving the opportunities available for clients to be fully informed regarding the calculation of the maintenance amount is being addressed through the OIP with the provision of a section on the CSA website dedicated to answering common queries from clients. In addition, explanatory leaflets are available to order, including revised explanatory leaflets with letters and making them available to order or download from the website. These leaflets have been given Crystal Mark accreditation from the Plain English Campaign.

<sup>41</sup> CSA caseworkers are bound by current legislation when assessing maintenance. Under the new rules, introduced in 2003, maintenance assessments are made using a percentage of net income per qualifying child. Some elements of individual circumstances are considered such as other children in the NRP's household, but the CSA is bound to impose the deductions as per the prescribed charges.

where a change in circumstances had occurred<sup>42</sup>. For many, this resulted in a feeling of frustration when they were unable to get any explanation or resolution from the CSA:

*'I think it is disgusting – (arrears of) £21,000 at £80 a month. I've calculated that...our son will probably be about 46 by the time that that £80 payment is paid. To be honest, now that I have moved on and got a really good job, my son's got a really good job and he can buy all his designer label clothes and all the rest, I don't have to support him. I think, "why do I need maintenance now for him?" I needed it all those years ago... You can't repeat those years to your child.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

*'At one point about three years ago, my eldest son who's got a very bad relationship with his father, went away to stay with him. About less than a year later he came back. But that completely threw them, and I made the foolish mistake of informing them that that had happened and that it was just one child with me. And from that point they couldn't even enter data on the computer, they said "it's doing something funny, it looks as though we're going to have to go manual". And those were the dreaded words, God knows what it meant...It then went to loads and loads of other departments, and I've never received anything since it went manual.'*

(PWC, Complaints)

## 2.2.2 Client experiences of case management

### *Accuracy and consistency of payments*

Non-benefit clients, both PWCs and NRPs alike, referred to having received information from the CSA concerning methods for receipt and payment of maintenance. In most cases direct debit was the preferred arrangement. The majority of participants had telephone contact with the CSA at various points of the payments stage – this was largely initiated by clients and took place where clients had experienced problems with the deduction or receipt of payments.

The area which attracted most criticism was the CSA's management of maintenance payments. Clients spoke of having experienced consistent problems with the amount and frequency of payments and emphasised the impact such problems had on their ability to plan financially and support their children.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Since the focus groups took place in March 2007, the Agency has taken steps to seek to improve case clearance as part of its ongoing operational improvement plan, including the provision of improved support, guidance and Management Information to CSA employees.

<sup>43</sup> Bell *et al.* (2006) discussed similar results regarding problems with the frequency of maintenance payments. According to Bell *et al.* around 50 per cent of all PWCs reported that there were issues with the frequency of payments, whether occasional or recurrent.

In the 'psycho-drawing' exercise at the start of the focus group, where participants were invited to create and explain a visual image of their perception of their experiences of dealing with the Agency, one participant drew a series of sad and happy faces. The participant explained that this illustrated how they felt about the CSA management of maintenance payments, where a sad face demonstrated how they felt at the beginning of the maintenance process when they were waiting for the CSA to sort out payments, and a happy face was attributed to their maintenance payments being received. This reverted back to a sad face when there were further complications:

*'This is mine, it's all messy and I'm sad and cheesed off and then its gets sorted and I get the money and I'm happy and then it gets messy again and I'm cheesed off.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, New Rule)

The research strongly reinforced the importance of understanding the wider context for clients which underpinned these concerns.

Many PWCs spoke openly about the various problems – economic, social and psychological – that these payments issues created in their lives:

*'If your child wants a pair of shoes and you are waiting for that money to come in, you can't get the shoes.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

*'I've been into ASDA and put nappies on the bottom of the trolley and paid for the top and stole the nappies. That's what it drives you to.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

*'My children have had a much harsher life than they should have had and I have much higher debts than I should have and I feel bitter about that. It's really unpleasant if you look at it from an overview perspective there's so many children across the country who are all having that, who've all got a bit of a chip on their shoulder about why didn't their dad bother and why did nobody do anything about it. Years ago my kids would have seen their father when he did bother to turn up, which was very rare – but now they're not interested and they do say, "why hasn't he paid anything", "why don't we get Christmas presents", "why", "why". It's not a healthy way for society going forward, apart from anything else.'*

(PWC, Benefits, Old Rule)

*'Sometimes it leads to the bairns as well thinking they've done something wrong.'*

(PWC, Benefit, Old Rule)

### *Managing changes in client circumstances*

The majority of NRPs reported having experienced regular problems with the amount and frequency of deductions, and this was largely due to the perceived inability of the Agency to manage changes in their circumstances.<sup>44</sup> Many NRPs recalled lengthy periods of time between reporting changed circumstances and hearing anything back from the CSA. In these cases, emotions turned to those of persecution and humiliation as they were faced with demands for the payment of arrears that had accrued whilst their case was being re-assessed, and the imposition of Deductions from Earnings Orders (DEOs):

*'I am a father who was sending in the cheques continuously. All of a sudden they inform my employer that this money should be taken from my salary. I don't know why. It is embarrassing. It appears in the eyes of your colleagues, that you are a runaway father. I think they find pleasure in embarrassing fathers...It's degrading.'*

(NRP, Complaints)

*'They contacted my employer and it was especially difficult for me because of my position in the company, because the people handling the issue are people below me and it was a little bit embarrassing. I told them I am not going to run away – I think it is because they can get money out of some people and that's all they care about.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, New Rule)

*'Since I left the university in April and told them the change of circumstances and filled in forms, they just keep putting on the arrears and arrears and arrears. Since I had my son in August it is nil now, but I still owe them £14,000.'*

(NRP, Complaints)

*'At various times I had various agreements with people there saying "look if you pay, because this has taken so long to sort out, if you pay a set amount for the time being, pay that amount and everything will be fine and we will sort it out later on" so I did that for a while but then they stopped taking the right amount of money and I ended up at one time, this is over a three month period where I was paying direct debit, cheque and they were taking a DO [DEO] at the same time. They are a nightmare and basically different departments don't talk to each other, they went into overdrive and different departments started coming after me as soon as I contacted them, an absolute nightmare'.*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

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<sup>44</sup> The introduction of a fixed-term liability award of 12 months is intended to simplify the calculation process and enable a faster, more accurate and transparent process to take place.

### 2.2.3 Debt enforcement

#### *Gathering and sharing information*

The majority of PWCs were of the opinion that the CSA does not make sufficient efforts to enforce maintenance payments and track down non-compliers<sup>45</sup>.

Particular concerns were raised regarding the efficiency of the processes in place to track down the NRP, with most clients noting that the CSA is unable to do this through their National Insurance number, expressing concern that Government departments do not interact with each other to share information:

*'I never understood why, when they had their National Insurance number and they had details, they can't find him. Nationally, do different Government departments talk to each other? I don't think so, that's why there's so much fraud in the country.'*

(PWC, Debt enforcement)

*'...the CSA say "Well, we don't know where he is – do you know where he is, do you know where he's working, do you know what he's doing?"... "Well no, you've got his National Insurance number, you should be able to trace him, if not then he's on benefits and you should be able to trace him through that. Why are you asking me?".'*

(PWC, Debt enforcement)

Related to this, some frustration was also expressed regarding the input required from the PWC to direct the CSA to the location of the NRP in debt enforcement cases – this reflects the findings from other groups on this issue<sup>46</sup>:

*'...basically I felt like I was working for the CSA and not getting paid.'*

(PWC, Debt enforcement)

#### *Verifying information from NRPs*

With specific reference to those cases going through debt enforcement processes, participants expressed particular frustrations with the perceived inability of the

<sup>45</sup> Under the redesign of child maintenance, the Government is extending the range of debt enforcement powers that will be available to C-MEC. These include measures such as: enforcing the surrender of an NRP's passport or imposing a curfew on them where they fail to pay maintenance; powers to collect directly from financial accounts; remove the requirement to apply to the courts for a Liability Order; and improving the way that information is exchanged with, and drawn from, HMRC, financial institutions and Credit Reference Agencies in order to trace NRPs and collect and enforce maintenance.

<sup>46</sup> The CSA is reliant on NRPs disclosing information to calculate maintenance. Exercising powers to gain information without NRP consent requires time.

CSA to verify information provided by NRPs. Participants described situations where the NRPs and PWCs were providing contradictory information and the CSA was either not able to check the information or was inefficient in doing so:

*'I wasn't happy with the assessment, they [the CSA] weren't in possession of the facts, and that actually came out when I went to court...I knew he wasn't paying rent, he was living with his cousin who was claiming Income Support and getting his rent paid so I knew he wasn't paying anything basically and he told the CSA he was paying rent and all the rest of it, so I was saying "No he's not paying this [rent] – where's your evidence?" and they [the CSA] said "We haven't got any evidence" and I said "So you haven't seen a rent book?"...I don't understand why the CSA couldn't ring up the local council and say "Is Mr so-and-so a tenant?".'*

(PWC, Debt enforcement)

*'The last time I talked to them, that was the debt enforcement people saying "oh, we've just had a very interesting conversation with Mr X and he's saying he's paying you weekly". So I said, "Well, where is the money going to because it's not coming to my house".'*

(PWC, Debt enforcement)

The Agency was also criticised by participants for its lack of intervention and action in cases where NRPs were perceived to be 'dodging' the system<sup>47</sup>:

*'I find the experience of the Child Support Agency and people that I know, they seem to sting their dads who are willing to pay and the ones who are not willing to pay seem to get off scot free and I think that needs to be looked at because they are willing to pay for their children and the ones who lie through their teeth can just completely get away with it, phone up, make threats and then they put everything on hold and go "oh dear it's a sensitive case perhaps we will put all of this on hold". They know how to play the system, dads.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, New Rule)

### *The length of the debt enforcement process*

Frustration was also expressed by many PWCs regarding the length of the debt enforcement process – those in the debt enforcement group noted that they had been involved in debt enforcement procedures for two to three years with no positive outcome.<sup>48</sup> More generally, the frustrations resulting from the difficulties experienced by PWCs in all focus groups gave rise to the general expectation that the CSA would not deliver on its debt enforcement imperatives:

<sup>47</sup> Future changes planned under the redesign of child maintenance propose using information sourced from HMRC to verify income, thus negating the need for NRPs to provide income data.

<sup>48</sup> The Government is extending the range of enforcement powers that are available and streamlining the framework in which they are used.

*'And you know every stage is so long and drawn out. I went to court in October 2005 and we're now March 2007 and I don't think I've had one letter since then except probably a couple after the initial court case.'*

(PWC, Debt enforcement)

*'I feel downtrodden, despaired, depressed because they phone you, write to you, give you this hope and then nothing. And then a few months down the line they're phoning you again and saying "we've been talking to Mr X" and ok, another letter, then nothing else. Basically, I don't see the point.'*

(PWC, Debt enforcement)

### *NRP views on Debt enforcement*

It is important to note that the perceived lack of debt enforcement was also raised by many NRPs<sup>49</sup> and there was consensus that disparities exist in the debt enforcement efforts made by the CSA vis-à-vis compliers and non-compliers:

*'Everyone knows that there are absent fathers and there are kids that suffer, everyone knows that, but my grudge is that we are easy targets, they're not chasing the fathers who are absent, they're hitting the easy targets that they've already got.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

*'Enforcement's critical, but you know enforcement is the last step...there are people who are trying to screw the system and really don't want to pay and want to get away with it.'*

(NRP, Debt enforcement)

There was a mixture within the NRPs of those who complied, and those who didn't and there were various reasons involved. Some felt non-payment was the only way to argue with the calculation, and seemed unaware of the consequences until they were applied, while others who disagreed with the calculation complied because they were aware of the debt enforcement procedures that could be applied:

*'I just didn't want to pay £130 a week, that went on for three months and in September I had a wage packet, I opened it up and seen that I was a bit short, seen a little CSA in the corner, minus, I could not believe it.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule, Cardiff)

<sup>49</sup> Since the focus groups took place in March 2007 the Agency has conducted a communications based campaign on enforcement. This was a regional campaign using a range of media, including advertising, direct mailing and proactive media relations to raise awareness of the Agency's enforcement powers.

*'The first six months I was mucking them about because I was being mucked about...I have co-operated with them because I know that they are going to have you anyway. I mentioned initially that period of six months or so, but that was right at the start, that was 15 years ago.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule, Cardiff)

*'Making threats to parents, to take you to court, that makes things worse.'*

(NRP, Benefit, New Rule, Bristol)

The NRP participants included in the debt enforcement group also believed that debt enforcement procedures were being imposed unnecessarily, noting their experiences of the CSA not collecting payments, the CSA being inflexible in responding to individual circumstances and having a private arrangement in place with the agreement of the PWC, as reasons for unnecessary debt enforcement intervention (Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1 Summary of NRPs' views on debt enforcement**

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- The relationship context is highly emotional and this makes the debt enforcement vehicle all the more important:  
*'You've got highly emotional issues that you are dealing with. It's not about the money, this is about kids, mothers, partners, jealousy, being piqued, all the stuff that comes into play in a divorce...and then you've got money on top of it...and you're dealing with this highly incompetent vehicle in the way they collect money and so everybody loses.'*
  - Inefficient payment administration was often cited as an issue:  
*'So I pay the cheque, cheque gets cashed, and then last week I get the inevitable letter saying we haven't received your payment and life just goes on. Obviously I call them up, and they say the system is down, can you call back tomorrow.'*
  - Inadequately trained employees:  
*'There's a lot of emotion involved, so it just can't be an information collection system, 'cos people are going to kill themselves. It's got to have somebody you can talk to and have some relationship with...you've got to have a decent, good, trained, qualified understanding case officer and everything cascades out from that.'*  
*'There has to be a person who combines elements of a social worker and a humane person. And also a person that has brain power that if you need to talk money, figures, that's familiar to them as well.'*
  - The Agency and its employees were perceived to be inaccessible:  
*'They didn't appear to me to have any kind of facility where you could go and talk to anybody, it's all on the phone, it's so faceless...they certainly never gave me any opportunity to sit down in front of somebody and take all the copies that they'd obviously lost and just talk them through it.'*
  - And, NRPs generally felt that they were treated as unwilling rather than unable to pay:  
*'Currently the system is set up so that you're all dodgers. You are regarded, treated as a dodger...you are tarnished with the same brush as the guy who's reckless, couldn't care less.'*
- 

Note: All quotations are from NRPs, Debt enforcement.

## 2.2.4 Dealing with client complaints<sup>50</sup>

The majority of participants spoke of having complained regularly in conversations with the CSA but few had been through a formal complaints or appeals process. The nature of formal complaints related mostly to the assessment and calculation of maintenance and the administration of payments. In some cases, participants spoke of having won appeals or having complaints resolved in their favour. However, given their experiences with the Agency and the timescales involved, participants were appeased rather than satisfied or happy.

In cases where complaints and appeals had not been resolved or had not been resolved in favour of the PWC, feelings of anger and defeat, ending in resignation, were experienced:

*'The assessment never changed, and I made a complaint about it, and my caseworker changed, and the person I'm meant to complain to got back to me with a letter saying something peculiar like "I'm writing to you because you complained and we have to respond to your complaint within two weeks, this is my response, yours...". You know, it was just nothing, basically, it was an acknowledgement, that's all it was, and they haven't done a thing or taken on board anything that I've complained about.'*

(PWC, Complaints)

Similar to the experiences of PWCs, in cases where complaints were resolved in favour of NRPs, lengthy time periods and previous poor experiences of the Agency led to feelings of placation rather than satisfaction:

*'Their complaints are interesting because you get a response in about three weeks and it usually takes you six months to talk to them. It shows that they don't look at your record, they probably can't find them. They don't look at them because they give you the standard response all of the time.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

*'The reply I had did not relate to what it [the complaint] was about.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule, Cardiff)

Feelings of extreme anger were experienced in cases where there was no recognition of the complaint or significant time periods had passed before the CSA acknowledged the complaint or appeal. Where complaints and appeals were not resolved in favour of NRPs, these sentiments turned to those of resignation and demoralisation:

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<sup>50</sup> In the last year the CSA has redesigned its complaints handling process, involving retraining employees, simplifying previous processes and allocation of a complaints caseworker.

*'I was constantly on the phone for two days...because they had taken money out that they shouldn't have. My employer couldn't do nothing about it, it was a mistake on their part...after a week of conversations, somebody phoned from the customer complaints department...if I hadn't heard anything by the Monday, that money would be transferred back into my account. That was the first time I had any positive response...Thankfully my employers realised I drive a van, I couldn't concentrate, I was emotionally distraught. They said... "you stay as you long as you need to on that phone". And this is how I got them to actually sit up and listen. They kept saying this person is at lunch and I kept following up, taking names, team numbers, I had to be onto them. A lot of us wouldn't have time for that. Thankfully my employers could see the stress I was under, that's how I got a quick response and the following Monday, that £500 went back into my account.'*

(NRP, Complaints)

*'And I did eventually complain obviously. I think they have to respond within two weeks, which they didn't, and it's just gone on and on and on. It's just a cycle that just never ends. And my daughter will be turning 16 in February, it's been going on for about 12 years.'*

(PWC, Complaints)

## 2.2.5 Communication and relationship channels

### *Management of client information*

Participants recalled instances of the CSA having lost or misplaced information relating to their case, for example, application forms, income information. In some cases clients spoke of the CSA having disclosed confidential information about the other party in their case which was considered inappropriate:

*'As soon as I had a baby and when they came around to fill out a form they said it would take about 12 weeks to get processed so I phoned them up and there was no trace of it, they lost it, so I went and done another one and got the Jobcentre Plus to send it off and they lost that one.'*

(PWC, Benefit, New Rule)

*'They said they had problems with their computers. "When will it be fixed?" "Probably not for six months". "Can't you work it out manually?" "No, it has to go through the computer". I was livid. "You mean, you haven't got a back up system to work out how much my assessment is, I can tell you how much I earn?". No, without this computer they couldn't work it out until six months time. I said "what is going to happen to my little boy, he needs to eat now?"*

(NRP, Complaints)

*'When I first got a letter...one thing I disagreed with, as much as I loved having the money and I got paid the money, on my letter it has all the names of the mothers of the kids, it didn't have the kids' names, but it had the mothers, saying what each mother would be getting, whether it would be for one child, two children...I had mine and my kid's name on there, his name, what he was earning, the amount that would be deducted for the children, but it weren't for me, it was for everybody, then it had all the mothers' names, with the amount of children that money had to be divided between. They gave him my phone number and that is how he got in contact with me and my kids after four years.'*

(PWC, Benefits, New Rule)

### *Accessibility and responsiveness of service*

The research has shown that clients referred to continuous difficulties encountered when trying to contact the CSA by telephone and recalled having frequently been passed from one person to another<sup>51</sup>. These difficulties coupled with the lack of face-to-face contact available and the cost of continually attempting to contact the Agency led to criticism of the remote nature of the service.

One client drew a picture illustrating that they had experienced problems relating to the accessibility and responsiveness of the CSA as well as the continuity of CSA employees. It showed the client telephoning the CSA, with the CSA employee sitting at their desk and choosing to ignore/not answer the call:

*'Every time I phone them, it takes me about a half hour to get through, nobody picks up the phone and when you do get through, you get passed over to someone else and then you have to tell your whole story again and the next time they do it again, so it is just pointless to phone.'*

(PWC, Benefit, New Rule)

Many clients complained of not being able to get information from the CSA about their case such as general progress information, reasons for delays and explanations of assessments and payments. Some referred to having been in contact with helpful CSA employees but not having been able to locate the same person in future contacts. The Agency was also criticised for not being proactive in keeping clients informed about their case and, generally, participants considered communication with the Agency to be a one-way process.

An image drawn by a client in relation to the accessibility of the CSA and information provision shows the client breaking the telephone with a bat:

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<sup>51</sup> There is a planned release of a significant upgrade of the IT system designed to route calls directly to appropriate caseworkers.

*'That's me smashing up the phone after talking to them. Mine is just that you can't get any information out of them no matter how much you do, it's just one of those places that no matter how many times you phone, you can phone twice a day and it's still not their department or she's on lunch, it's like you can't be on lunch at 10 o'clock in the morning, really can you, so that's my picture there.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

An image by another client depicts the client in a rage, with a black cloud overhead, a bottle of pills in one hand and the telephone in another:

*'This is me on medication, absolutely beside myself, trying to look after a child and trying to be a normal mum faced with continually ringing the CSA, continually asking questions, getting nothing back, no proper feedback, no money and feeling that my son has been really let down and me feeling that I've let my son down as well and it did really have a terrible emotional mental effect on me.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

There seemed to be a broad consensus across clients that the Agency lacks the flexibility required to adapt and respond to their changing needs. Participants were critical of the lengthy time periods involved in progressing through the various stages of their CSA journey. Whilst participants considered the response times in the Client Charter to be adequate, in most cases, there was little evidence of these standards having been met.

*'They're so slow and it doesn't matter how many times you phone them, you give them information, they're slow in sorting things out, they're slow in getting back to you, they're slow. You are chasing them all the time. That's my experience. And eventually, they do try and sort something out but it's slow.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

One client drew a brick wall to describe how they felt about communicating with the CSA:

*'A brick wall because it's been a totally one-way process dealing with the CSA, they tell me what's happening... they never listen to anything I say, they never give me the opportunity to talk to them.'*

(NRP, Benefit, New Rule)

### *Client handling*

Whilst some participants reported having dealt with capable CSA employees, a general view was expressed during the focus groups that CSA employees demonstrate a lack of understanding and empathy towards clients and the situations they face. The caseworker model was thought to work well where

there was consistency, however, most participants reported having experienced frequent changes in the caseworker assigned to them:<sup>52</sup>

*'Basically they hassle you, and hassle you and hassle you to give them information...Once you give them the information they do nothing with it anyway. That's what I think – nothing happens with it...It's a waste of time.'*

(PWC, Benefit, Old Rule)

*'In a way a lot of women are criminalised – some of the questions that are asked are very intrusive and some people are quite aggressive towards you... with me it wasn't presented as them giving help – it was presented as them finding out the truth...targeting you and criminalising you and treating you as if you are at fault. That's an attitude – that's nothing to do with money is it? That's training or something.'*

(PWC, Benefits, Old Rule)

Almost all NRPs were dissatisfied with their treatment by CSA employees – there was consensus that they were viewed as 'absent' fathers and therefore, harassed for information, when in fact many had regular contact with their children. These emotions were stronger amongst NRPs in employment:

*'They mentioned it once, an absent father. I wiped the floor with them. I said "I see my kids whenever I want, that's one thing – she would never stop me. Absent fathers don't take their kids out and spend money on them bowling...absent fathers don't buy their clothes, absent fathers don't buy school uniforms, absent fathers don't spend money on holidays for them, take them on holidays, absent fathers don't do that so don't call me one".'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

*'And you feel that they are placing you in a category of fathers that don't really care, don't want to pay up. It is that kind of thing and then they remind you that they have all sorts of ways that they can chase you. They will get hold of you don't worry, the courts are there, the police are there, it is a crime.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, New Rule)

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<sup>52</sup> Wikeley *et al.* (2001) support this through their finding that nearly half of NRPs and a third of PWCs had difficulty in sourcing a CSA employee familiar with their case. Their study found that clients found many people had previously dealt with their case. Since the Wikeley *et al.* report and the focus groups have taken place, the Agency has also introduced a new operating model. This aims to ensure more availability of caseworkers with the right experience and knowledge of individual cases to take responsibility for owning issues through to resolution.

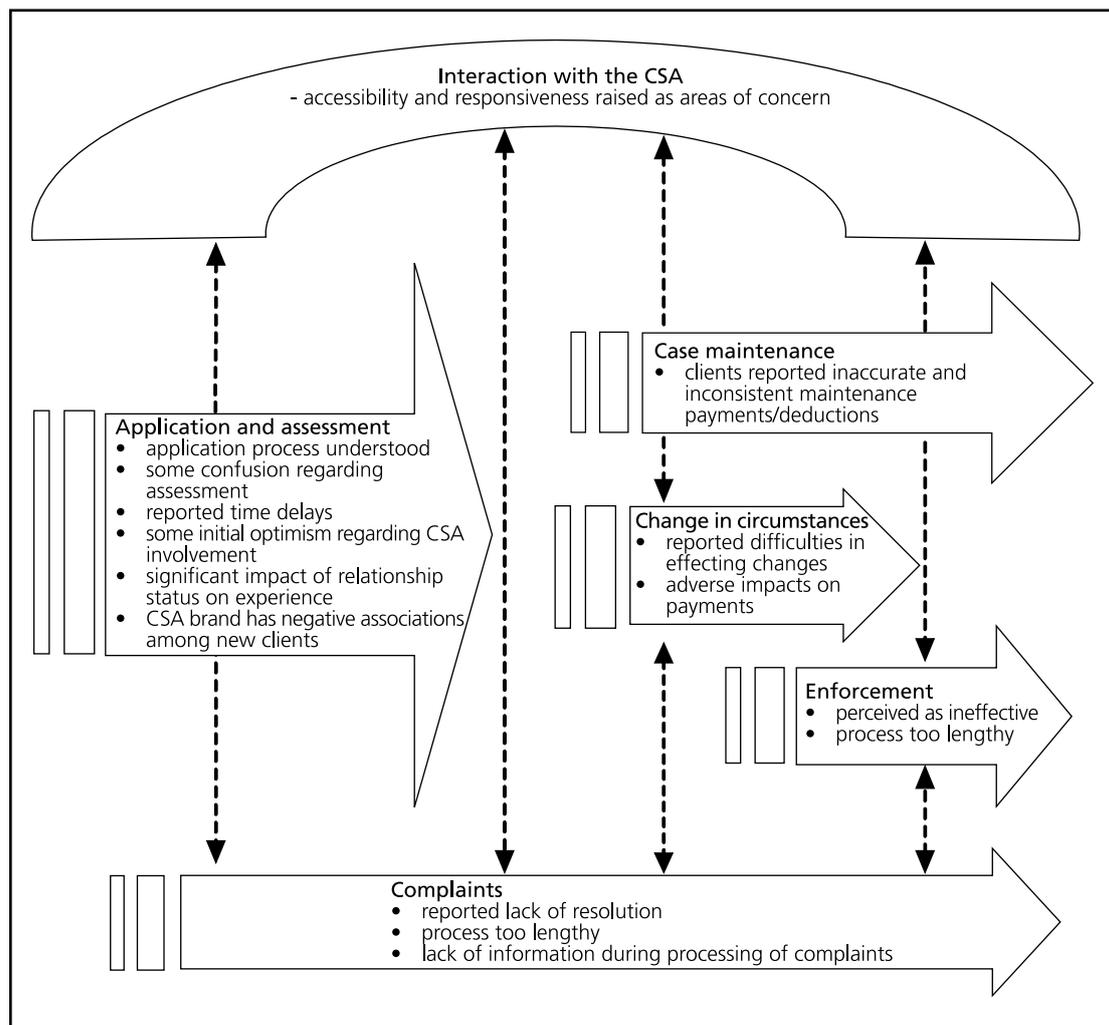
*'The attitude of the people in the CSA starts with "you are the one in the wrong here" and you have to explain to them that you have paid from the outset and suddenly the tone changes but they still start with the principle that the male is wrong and that I find very frustrating and a slightly sexist attitude.'*

(NRP, Benefit, New Rule)

## 2.2.6 Summary

Figure 2.1 summarises the key findings from the focus groups regarding client experiences of CSA service delivery at various stages. A few participants had experienced no issues with the service received. However, in general the picture is one of relatively poor performance and significant client dissatisfaction.

**Figure 2.1 Summary of client views of CSA service**



In addition to service specific issues such as confusion regarding maintenance assessment formulae and systems, perceptions of poor performance and client dissatisfaction are driven largely by the following cross-cutting factors:

- the CSA was perceived by many to be remote, and a rather inaccessible service;
- CSA employees were often considered to be unsympathetic and not particularly well equipped to deal with the often complex contextual issues surrounding the process of assessing and managing child maintenance;
- for many clients, significant time delays were experienced in all parts of their interaction with the Agency, often leading to an element of frustration and anger among clients;
- management of client information and IT systems were considered by many clients to be rather ineffective and a significant contributing factor to problems experienced; and
- the outcome of each part of the process and as a result, the process overall, generally does not meet client expectations, and generally this has led to a lack of faith in the CSA's ability to deliver.

It should be noted that at the time the focus groups were conducted (early in 2007), the general picture was one of relatively poor performance and client dissatisfaction amongst the participants of these groups. Since this time, the OIP and the Agency itself has moved to address many of the issues the focus groups raised.

## 2.3 Lessons for future client insight research

This section sets out some key findings from the focus groups which were important from the point of view of designing the quantitative survey research, and also when considering CSA client insight research more widely. It comprises the following sections:

- the impact of policy on the client experience;
- the interface between the client context and service delivery;
- a proposed framework for client insight;
- a conceptual model for client insight research; and
- maintenance amounts and client experience.

### 2.3.1 The impact of policy on the client experience

Some participants, both PWCs and NRPs, were broadly satisfied with the amount of maintenance they were entitled to, or were required to pay and a few experienced consistency in the amount and frequency of payments.

*'They have helped me in a big way with my last child and I am very happy with the progress they are making.'*

(PWC, Benefit, New Rule)

One client drew an image of themselves smiling with a shopping basket full of goods:

*'That's me and I'm happy with it because they give me £13.45 a week and that's enough to buy my little boy all his nappies and things.'*

(PWC, Benefit, New Scheme)

However, based on the focus group evidence, there seemed to be a broad dissatisfaction about the maintenance calculation, particularly amongst certain groups:

- PWC benefits clients (where the NRP was employed) due to the low amount they received in relation to the amount their ex-partners were paying;
- high earning NRP non-benefit clients who felt the calculation did not relate to affordability for them or to the actual cost of maintaining a child<sup>53</sup>; and
- NRP benefits clients for whom their income made even the small calculation and any arrears difficult to pay.

The majority of clients who were dissatisfied with the calculation, both NRPs and PWCs, gave examples of phoning CSA offices repeatedly for a breakdown and explanation of the assessment figure, or for a reassessment based on factors that the CSA had not considered. Many of these clients became placated over time, expressing the idea of settling for the figure since their efforts had failed to alter it. Some expressed embarrassment or humiliation at having to phone to chase such small amounts of money. This illustrates the importance of child maintenance to clients and also the different perspectives depending on the type of client. For example this evidence suggests an emerging picture where PWCs are focused on the adequacy of the payment in contributing to child upbringing, and NRPs express concern over the accuracy and appropriateness of payments. These two perspectives will have a bearing on how the Agency interacts with these two types of clients and understanding these differing perspectives is likely to be of value for CSA front-line employees with regard to client handling.

*'I actually find it quite embarrassing as well...£5 a week is so important to you because that's what pays the bills.'*

(PWC, Benefit, New Rule)

*'When they sent the amount for my son, I couldn't believe it 'cos it was only enough to pay for nappies and I was just shocked, I didn't understand how they worked out this £1.50 or whatever is going to pay for nappies, you know, children need nappies, clothes and so on. And it just didn't make sense.'*

(PWC, Benefit, New Rule)

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<sup>53</sup> The maintenance calculation is not meant to reflect the cost of supporting a child, however, focus group participants often made this connection.

*'I wrote and said I would not pay this much as I was already paying such a lot already. They just keep saying give me the money. I have never had a satisfactory outcome, and while this is going on they are increasing the chasing mechanism, they are moving on to your employers irrespective of the fact that you have a correspondence that is going backwards and forwards with them. It is like a two-track system where they will continue to keep on the pressure.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, New Rule)

One client drew a picture of themselves on the phone to the CSA, surrounded by three children. The other parent is also presented in the same picture, surrounded by a house, car, caravan and a swimming pool:

*'Basically, that's me on the phone to CSA with my three children being told he hasn't got enough income. And that's him with his two cars – one's a Jag which cost him £36,000, his five bedroom house, his swimming pool, his static caravan. And the CSA are telling me that he doesn't have enough income to pay for child support.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

Clients considered the assessment procedures to be inflexible and were aggrieved at the perceived lack of recognition of individual circumstances, namely outgoings and financial support being provided to the child outside of the CSA.

One client drew a picture of themselves hanging to describe how they felt about their dealings with the CSA:

*'I feel I was hung out to dry, I have dealt with them for 15/16 years, I had five years where I worked everyday, I had a job, five days a week, I worked two days extra, they took nothing into account, they couldn't care less about me, they certainly couldn't care less about my daughter and I just felt let down by them.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

*'I think it's quite unfair – it depends on what the father does and where the father is because I've said before I've got two different children to two different fathers. My eldest daughter's father always paid the maintenance since she was born but because I was on the benefits system they pushed the CSA on my ex-ex partner and crippled him, completely crippled him. They actually paid me £4.50 in benefits and the father had to pay me £80 a week. They crippled him. Now the other father of my youngest child doesn't pay a penny, he couldn't care less. They're not worried because I'd worked and I'm on Tax Credits they can't be bothered and now because I have gone back into the benefits system now they are pushing it all up again now. So what I'm saying is there's an unfairness for certain fathers and certain circumstances, everything is black and white to them and it is not like that in real life.'*

(PWC, Non-benefit, New Rule)

From the point of view of NRPs on benefits, whilst the deduction of £5 a week was not considered an overly excessive amount of money, it was thought to be unfair in cases where the PWC was relatively wealthier. With regard to employed NRPs, many considered the amounts to be excessive. Some clients were of the opinion that the excessive amounts act as a disincentive to work. Considering this finding in conjunction with the different client perspectives on maintenance amounts explored earlier, suggests that clients need to be clear on how much they are paying, why and the contribution that makes to the costs of raising a child<sup>54</sup>.

An NRP client drew a two-part diagram, depicting the split between his lifestyle and that of the PWC. It showed the NRP living in a council house and shopping in local shops, with the PWC living in a larger house, two cars and a choice of where she could shop:

*'This represents my wife in her fancy house, in her four bedroom house, with her double garage and her two cars, and where she shops. And this is me in my little council house and where I shop. I end up stony-broke, when I was in full-time employment I was paying her, which I've not got a problem with. I want to pay for my children, now that I am unemployed and I'm on benefit that's the sort of lifestyle I'm leading compared to her.'*

(NRP, Benefit, New Rule)

Another client drew a picture of themselves lying in bed depressed to describe how they felt about the maintenance amount:

*'Had it not been for my very good upbringing from my family, I would be like that, totally out of it, depressed. 1997, my wife at the time tells me, "I no longer love you, I am going to be leaving you". I left my marital home in '97, went to stay with my mother. My kids were only six and four. I continued to pay the mortgage on the house for a whole year. I think it was about £600 at the time, I was taking home about £1,000. She said "you need to be supporting the kids". I agreed a nominal fee, I think it was about £150 a month, which was quite reasonable, but she said, "no, it's not enough". So in December '98 I got a letter through my door saying you're going to have a deduction of earnings because you haven't agreed. So £500 came out of my wages that Dec, I was absolutely devastated.'*

(NRP, Complaints)

One specific payments-related policy issue to emerge from the focus groups was that a number of employed NRPs were extremely aggrieved at having discovered that only a minimum amount of the money paid by them was being given to the

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<sup>54</sup> The maintenance calculation is not meant to reflect the cost of supporting a child, however, focus group participants often made this connection.

PWC for the children (i.e. in cases where the PWC receives benefits).<sup>55</sup> Participants were generally unclear of the reasons behind this, and it contributed to a wider sense of injustice that many of them felt. Clarity on this issue provided by the Agency may help reduce confusion and any impact this may have on overall attitudes to the CSA.

One participant drew a number of pound symbols (£) flushing down a toilet to describe how they felt about the maintenance amount:

*'That's money down the toilet. My ex-partner, who's got my son, she can't work, she's on disability and so on and I'm paying more than the social's paying her, so I might as well just give her the money directly instead of going through the CSA. That's what I feel like – it's just money going down the drain. I'm trying to support him, take him on days out, buy whatever to keep up with the peer pressure and it just seems like money wasted when I could keep it myself and give him the lifestyle that I want to give him out of the money I've earned.'*

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Rule)

### **2.3.2 The interface between the client context and service delivery**

It is clear from the evidence provided thus far that a number of factors have a bearing on the attitudes expressed in the focus groups. In addition to the economic circumstances of clients, the emotional context regarding past and current NRP/PWC relationship status, and the result of their experience of CSA service delivery, are also important factors in shaping clients' overall views of the CSA.

One client drew a sad face with tears to describe their emotions during their experience with the CSA:

*'This is me, the kids and the ex-partner and it's caused disruption and upset to us all really. We had a happy arrangement between ourselves which was overruled by the CSA and has caused upset.'*<sup>56</sup>

(NRP, Non-benefit, Old Scheme)

<sup>55</sup> The Government is introducing an increase to the child maintenance disregard in income-related benefits. This will mean that more maintenance paid flows directly to PWCs for the benefit of the child. It is intended that this will improve the incentive for the PWC to seek payment and the non-resident parent to pay.

<sup>56</sup> Under the redesign of child maintenance, by 2008, the requirement that PWCs claiming benefit are treated as applying for child maintenance will be removed. This will allow parents to take responsibility for making their own maintenance arrangements in a way which suits them and their children best.

Another client drew a small lady surrounded by question and exclamation marks as a large hand points a finger at her. The caption reads 'Guess Who?':

*'You've got to guess which is the CSA and which is me. Big clue...my ex-husband doesn't work and I didn't really see the point in chasing up for the money and they didn't communicate with me at all other than me signing the form which they told me that they would take my benefit off me if I didn't sign.'*

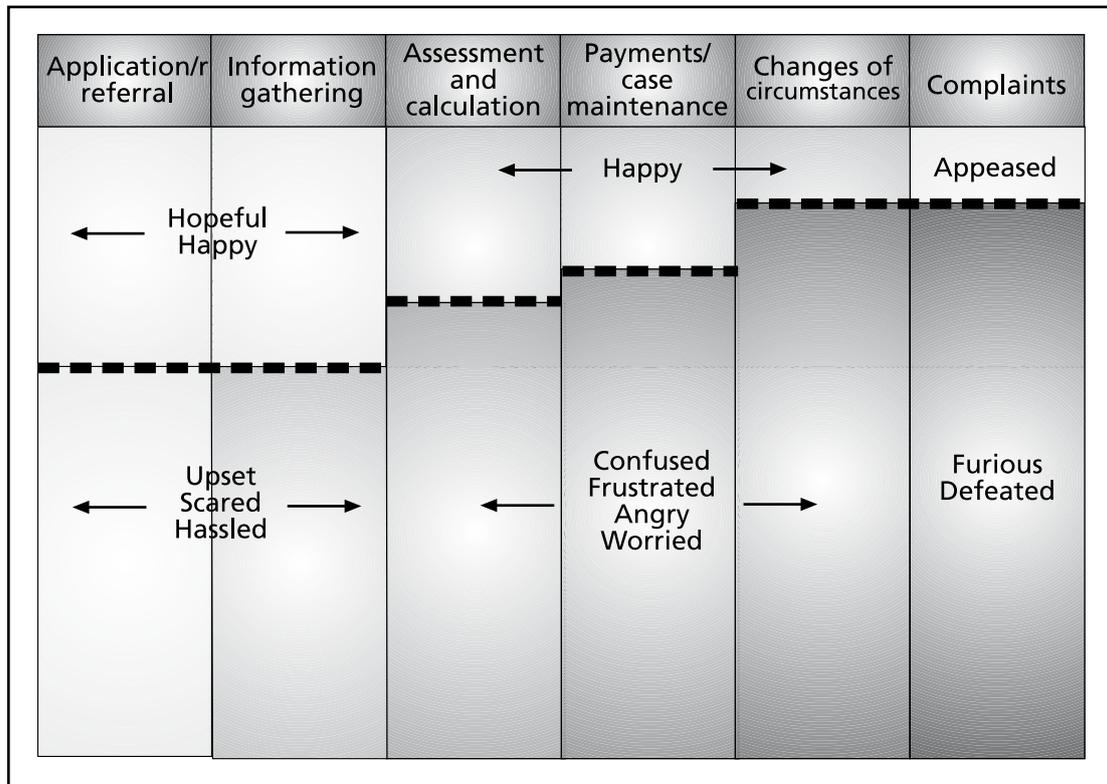
(PWC, Benefit, New Scheme)

Figure 2.2 illustrates the general feeling among participants that inefficiencies in CSA service delivery added to these difficulties – some initial hope that the CSA would assist in arranging and managing child maintenance payments, more often than not turned to frustration and anger.

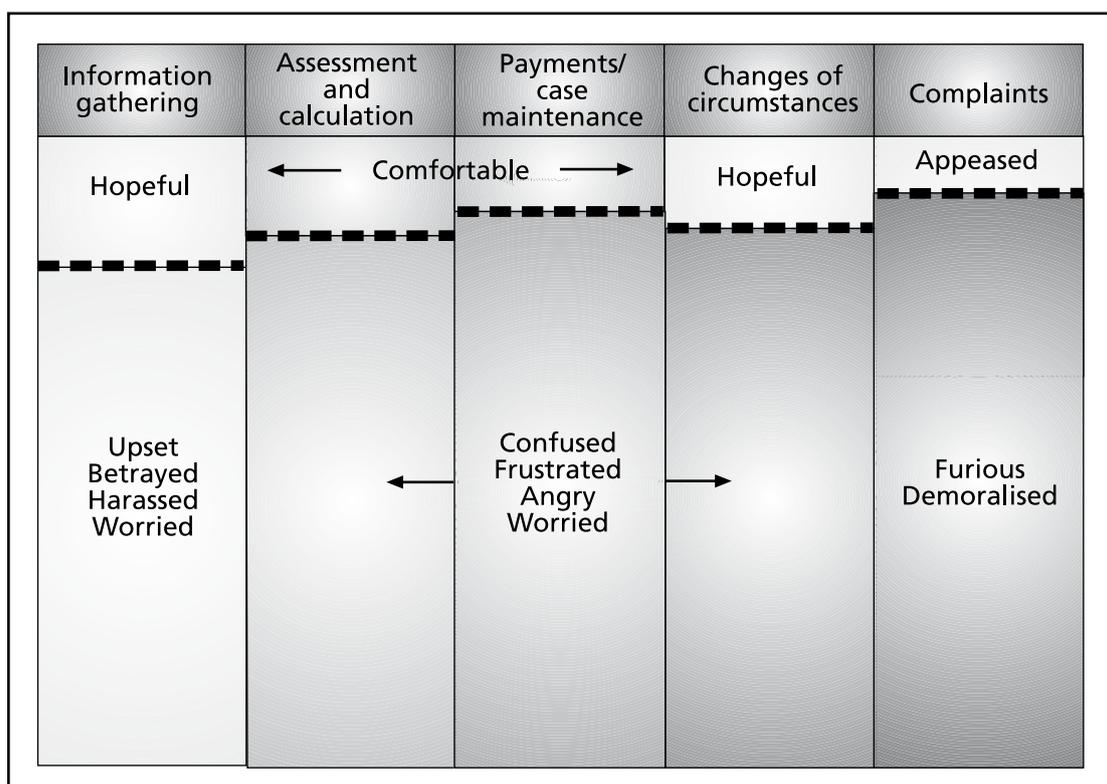
Building on this, it is clear through the research that the emotions felt by PWC and NRP clients are different at all stages of their experience with the CSA. The dashed lines in Figures 2.2 and 2.3 separate the positive emotions experienced from the negative, and its position reflects broadly the magnitude of the emotion, i.e. the higher the position of the line, the more people are experiencing negative emotions and the less who are experiencing positive.

These illustrate the increasing number of clients experiencing negative emotions as they progress through the various stages of CSA service provision, particularly in the case of NRPs who are, generally, less likely to experience positive emotions and also tend to be angrier than PWCs. The key point here is that, from a service delivery point of view, it is extremely important to understand and acknowledge the emotional state of CSA clients, since doing so will help inform, to some extent, the way in which the CSA services are delivered.

**Figure 2.2 PWCs – the emotional journey**



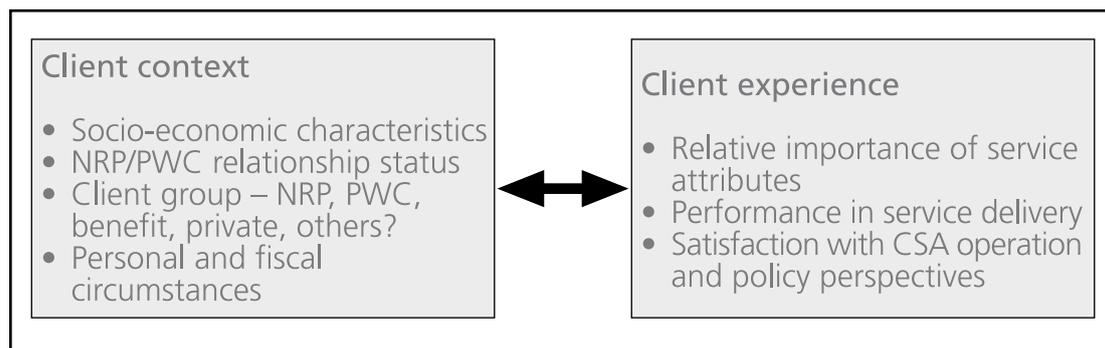
**Figure 2.3 NRPs – the emotional journey**



### 2.3.3 A proposed framework for client insight

Findings from the qualitative research suggest that there are two key ingredients that will be important in framing future CSA client insight research, namely: the client context and client experience (Figure 2.4).

**Figure 2.4 A proposed model for CSA client insight**



#### *Client context*

It is clear from the qualitative research that a number of contextual factors are key to understanding the client base. It is likely that the past and current status of the NRP/PWC relationship, contact with the child (extent of shared care) and personal and fiscal circumstances all impact on expectations and attitudes regarding CSA service delivery. It will be important in future client insight research to explore the relative influence of these factors. The research also suggests that there are clear differences between the attitudes of particular client groups. For example, PWCs and NRPs are defined by the CSA as clients, however, their respective roles in arranging child maintenance are different, and their resulting experience also differs. This is also the case for some non-benefit and benefit clients. Considering such contextual factors on a larger scale will serve to identify particular client groups, their attitudes, and any service specific issues which may be particularly pertinent to those segments.

#### *Client experience*

To scope and explore the components relevant to a positive client experience, an exercise was included in the focus groups that allowed clients to identify those areas that were central to improving service delivery and their experience of the CSA. Participants were asked firstly to define those areas which would improve their experience, and then prioritise the list by allocating a total of 100 points across the areas identified. A summary of the issues raised by clients as influencing the quality of service delivery is as follows:

- **taking account of NRP circumstances when calculating child maintenance** – the current mechanism for taking account of NRP circumstances as part of the assessment calculation was perceived to be unfair by NRPs, with a preference being noted for a system that is means-tested and based on the income of both parents;

- **ensuring the child maintenance goes to the PWC** – NRPs consistently raised concerns that monies being collected were not being passed on to the PWC and ultimately the child – NRPs expressed a need to improve the payments management system and to provide a mechanism whereby the CSA can provide proof to NRPs that money had been paid to the PWC;
- **CSA employee skills** – the need to improve CSA employee skills was frequently raised throughout the course of the focus groups and was noted by all as a factor driving satisfaction.<sup>57</sup> Particular mention was made of the need to improve hard skills, such as knowledge of how the case is progressing but also softer, client handling skills. Empathy was noted in all groups as a key skills deficit. This stems from the difficulty of the context within which child maintenance is being arranged and also in response to the frustrations experienced when the service failed to deliver for clients;
- **effective payment systems** – PWCs noted improving the efficiency of payment processes as an action that would improve satisfaction, i.e. payments should be received on time and in the agreed way. This was also noted by some NRPs who stated that the CSA had failed to take payments from their accounts when they were endeavouring to pay;
- **effective debt enforcement** – all NRPs and PWCs noted the need for targeted and effective debt enforcement procedures. This was more important to PWCs than NRPs. NRPs were particularly vocal about targeting those who were actively trying to evade paying as opposed to those whose arrears had occurred due to administration problems;
- **IT systems** – participants noted the ineffective IT systems as a frustration and noted their improvement as an integral part of improving satisfaction. Some NRPs also noted that improvement in the systems would probably improve CSA employees' ability to help;
- **communication methods** – this issue was a recurring aspect of focus group discussions as a whole and was noted as an important satisfaction driver. Particular areas of concern noted were the comprehensibility and personalisation of letters, the need to simplify and condense CSA explanatory literature and the ability to access face-to-face discussions if requested. Many participants also noted the need to be more transparent about the way in which the maintenance calculation was made – this was particularly prevalent among NRPs;

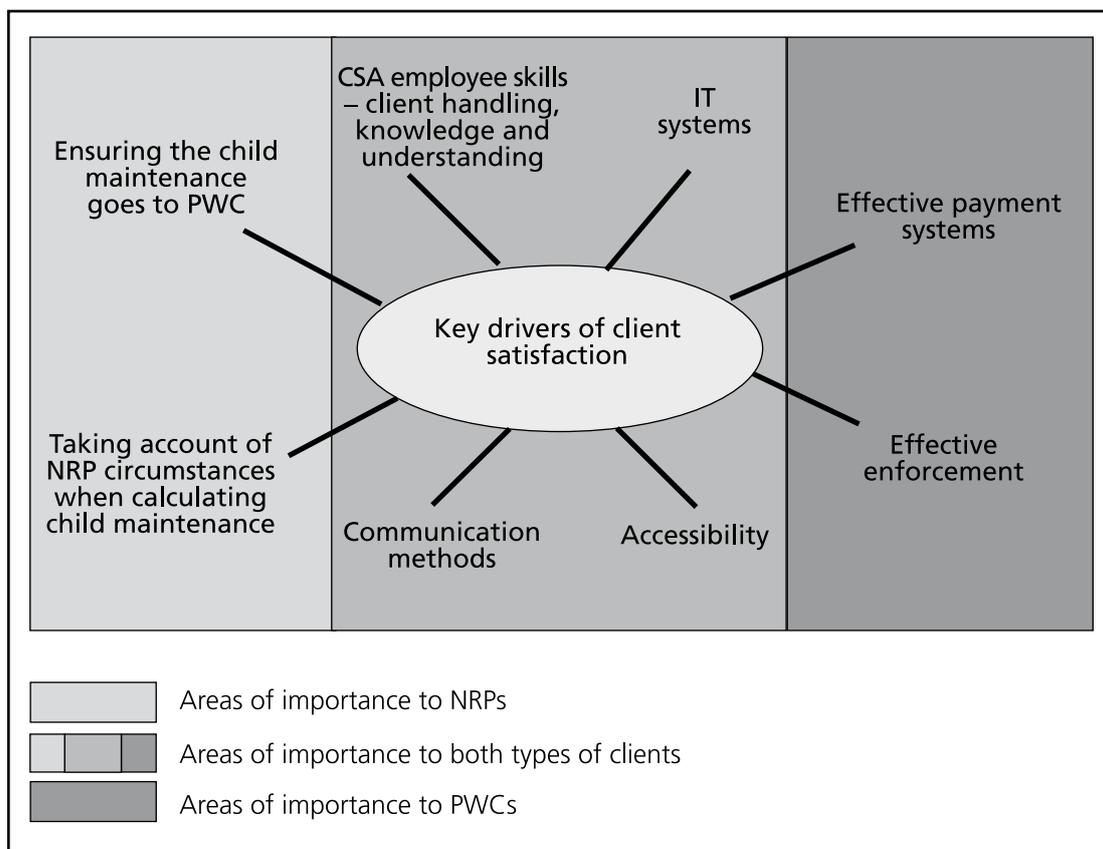
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<sup>57</sup> Since the focus groups have taken place, the Agency has introduced an education programme, which aims to mainstream client insight into the Agency's culture change and training programmes.

- **accessibility** – all participants gave examples of the difficulties in accessing the CSA, noting the ability of the CSA to provide an informed person to answer questions, returning calls and being available outside of Monday to Friday between 9 o'clock and 5 o'clock as key factors for improving client satisfaction with accessibility. All participants were also of the view that the CSA made limited efforts (both proactively and reactively) to keep clients informed; and
- **specialist assistance** – individuals going through debt enforcement proceedings expressed the desire to have the specialist assistance of a case worker who understands the complexity of their case and the debt enforcement procedures to give advice to both NRPs and PWCs.

It is evident from the research that there are some issues which are relevant to both NRPs and PWCs such as the CSA IT systems and the accessibility of the Agency. However, there are some issues which are important only to NRPs, for example, ensuring that the maintenance collected goes directly to the PWC and for the PWCs, for example, ensuring an effective debt enforcement system (Figure 2.5).

**Figure 2.5 The range of issues influencing client experience**



In order to investigate the relative importance of factors contributing to client satisfaction or dissatisfaction, focus group participants were asked to complete an 'importance ranking task'. This involved firstly, identifying those factors considered to be impacting on satisfaction levels. When the factors had been discussed and

agreed, participants were then asked to assume they had a total of 100 points to distribute between these factors according to their relative importance. The group then discussed and agreed an allocation of points to be attributed to service components to reflect their relative importance.

Set out in Table 2.2 is a summary of the relative importance of each service component across the focus groups. Common themes of considerable importance are CSA employee skills, communication methods and accessibility. The key differences lie in calculating and making payments. While the calculation formula used by the CSA is designed to take account of changing circumstances and affordability issues, NRPs did not consider this to be the case from their experience. While it is recognised that this is a policy issue, it is worth noting that this is of considerable importance to this client group and its effect is likely to impact negatively on wider experience of operational issues. PWCs are predominantly concerned with receiving payments in a timely and efficient manner and that the CSA enforces their assessment decisions. It is also worth noting that in some groups, participants struggled to come to a consensus on the importance of service factors and that this perhaps stems from their personal context.

**Table 2.2 Summary of importance of service components**

Service components	NRP points	PWC points
Taking account of NRP circumstances when calculating maintenance	35	-
Ensuring the child maintenance goes to the PWC	30	-
Staff skills – client handling, knowledge and understanding	20	25
Effective payment systems	-	35
Effective debt enforcement	5	15
IT systems	-	5
Communication methods	5	10
Accessibility	5	10

### 2.3.4 Summary

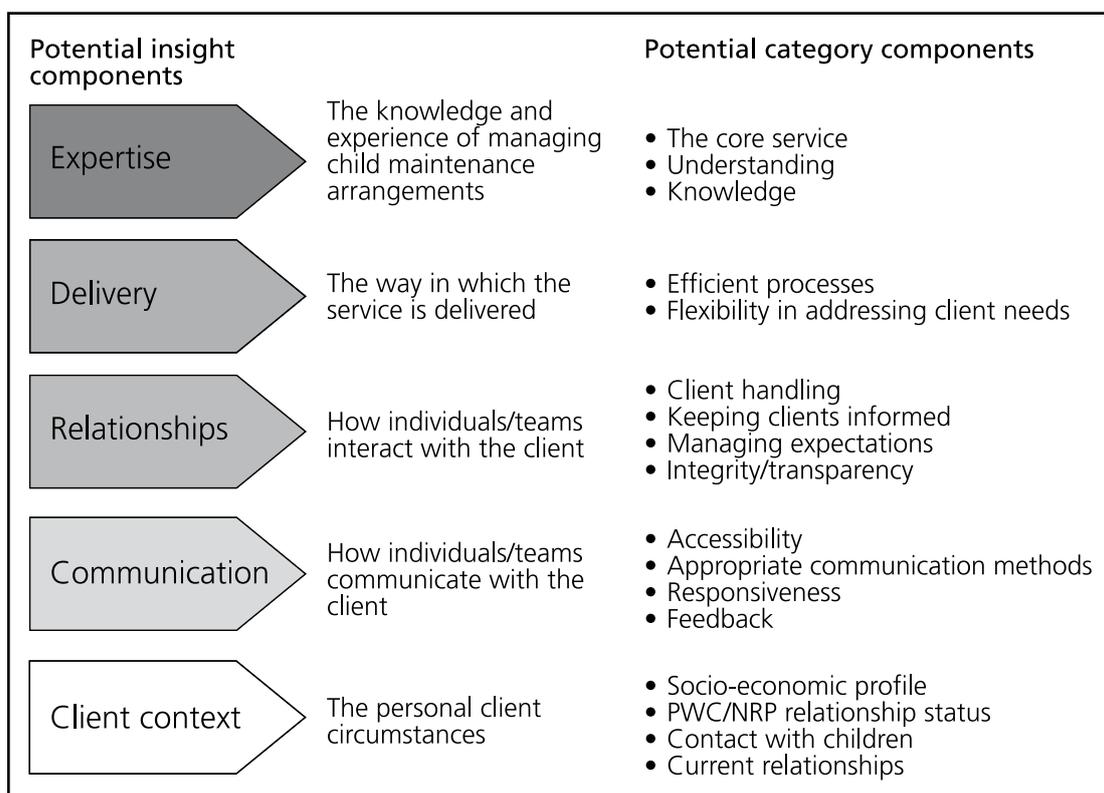
It was clear from views expressed during the focus group sessions that three major factors were impacting on client experience, namely:

- **the quality of service** – this is expressed as **Delivery** in the model (Figure 2.6). Clients expressed views regarding the actual service received, such as delayed assessment, inaccurate payments, etc. and it was clear that these service delivery factors impacted on their overall experience;

- **the way in which the service was delivered** – clients often expressed views regarding the way in which their case was handled and their interaction with the CSA. These views focused on their communication with CSA (expressed as **Communication** in the model) the way in which they were treated (expressed as **Relationships** in the model) and their confidence in the CSA and the CSA's ability to provide an understanding of the system (expressed as **Expertise** in the model); and
- **personal context** – clients expressed views regarding the status of the relationship with the PWC/NRP and the impact of this on their wider experience of relationship breakdown and arranging child maintenance. It was clear that those focus group participants on better terms with the other parent expressed more understanding with regard to child maintenance payments and those with poorer relationships were perhaps less sympathetic. Contact with the child also emerged as an important issue, specifically around shared care and impact of contact on child maintenance amounts. These issues are expressed as **Client context** in the model.

Building on the lessons for future research and the framework for client insight, a model was developed to inform and structure the quantitative questionnaire, which was the next stage of the client insight research going forward (Figure 2.6).

**Figure 2.6 Overview of proposed model for client insight research**



The model was used as a basis for constructing the questionnaire for the quantitative survey and ensuring that the issues explored were those raised by clients. In considering these aspects of insight, client views on importance, performance and satisfaction were explored. Asking importance allows understanding of a client's priorities and consideration of these in the context of service performance. Methodologically, gathering these ratings is an imperative in performing more complex value-added analysis. Performance and satisfaction are related concepts, with performance referring to the extent to which a particular aspect of service was delivered appropriately, and satisfaction being influenced not only by performance but by expectations and personal context. It is important to consider both concepts in exploring client experiences.



## 3 Profile of Child Support Agency clients

### 3.1 Introduction

Understanding the profile of respondents is a critical factor in exploring client insight. Two factors are relevant – the client context and the extent of experience of the Child Support Agency (CSA) service. The outline of this section is as follows:

- understanding the client context;
- extent of experience of the CSA service; and
- clients with no contact in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007).

### 3.2 Understanding the client context

In total 4,006 clients responded to the survey. The characteristics of the client base surveyed are presented in Table 3.1 which shows that an even spread of parents with care (PWCs) and non-resident parents (NRPs) responded to the survey (this was achieved using quota controls). A slightly higher percentage of old rules clients (53 per cent) responded to the survey than new rules clients. Other characteristics show that the majority of the CSA client base:

- is of a white ethnic background (92 per cent);
- have no registered disability (83 per cent);
- were married or living together with the other parent on the case previously (76 per cent); and
- had no maintenance arrangement in place prior to contact with the CSA (59 per cent).

**Table 3.1 Profile of all respondents**

Segment	Client/case type	Percentage of respondents
Case type	Client type	PWC (51%) and NRP (49%)
	Intake type*	Benefit intake clients (50%), non-benefit intake clients (19%) and unknown** (31%)
	CSA rules	Old rules (53%) and new rules (47%)
Demographics	Ethnicity	White (92%), BME***, Asian and other (5%) and refused (3%)
	Disability <sup>1</sup>	Yes (15%), no (83%) and refused (2%)
Case status	Payment type	Collection (89%) and maintenance direct (11%)
	Previous maintenance arrangement	Yes (41%) and no (59%)
	Compliance status <sup>2</sup>	Paying (39%)****, not paying (14%)***** and no payment expected (47%)*****
Relationship status	Previous relationship status	Married (48%), living together (26%) and other (26%)
	Current relationship with other parent	Generally good (31%), generally poor (49%), neither (16%) and refused (4%)
	Reported level of contact NRP has with child(ren) <sup>3</sup>	Frequent (50%), infrequent (17%), no contact at all (29%) and refused (4%)

Weighted base: 4,006 respondents, unweighted base: 4,006.

Figures in table may not add to 100% due to rounding.

\*Intake type refers to the employment status of individuals at their first contact point with the CSA and does not consider any changes in employment status thereafter.

\*\*The CSA database does not distinguish the referral status of CSA clients. Hence in this subgroup all old rules clients are referred to as 'unknown'.

\*\*\*Black Minority Ethnic.

\*\*\*\*'Paying' refers to cases which are 'fully compliant', 'partially compliant' or 'maintenance direct'.

\*\*\*\*\*'Not paying' refers to cases which are 'non compliant'.

\*\*\*\*\*'No payment' expected refers to cases which are 'assessed not charging', 'nil assessed' or 'without calculation'.

<sup>1</sup> The disability question asked was: *Q19 Do you have any long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity that gives you substantial difficulties in any aspect of your day to day life? By long standing, I mean anything that has troubled you over a period of at least 12 months or is likely to affect you over a period of 12 months?*

<sup>2</sup> Case status information is based on CSA administrative data.

<sup>3</sup> This is based on both PWC and NRP opinion.

Building on the qualitative findings relating to the impact of relationships on client experiences, data was gathered in the survey pertaining to this issue. The survey suggests that a substantial proportion of the client base has difficult relationship circumstances with the other parent (49 per cent of those surveyed). A further small proportion of respondents stated that they had a mixed relationship which

is sometimes poor and sometimes good (16 per cent). This can be due to either current arrangements with the other parent or as a result of the relationship breakdown originally.

Forty-six per cent of the respondents surveyed (both NRPs and PWCs) stated that NRPs have no contact or irregular contact with their child, whereas 55 per cent have regular contact. These findings illustrate that, often, the CSA is providing a service in a challenging environment. We explore the impact of these factors on the client experience in the quantitative analysis presented later in this chapter.

### 3.3 Extent of experience of the Child Support Agency service

In order to maximise accuracy of recall and focus the research on current CSA service provision, respondents were asked to select those CSA services they had dealings with in the last year. For example, in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), some clients only interacted with the CSA in respect of the application and assessment process, whereas others had longer client journeys, dealing with the Agency in relation to multiple elements of CSA service. In essence the survey involved taking a slice of 4,006 clients and asking at which touch-points clients had dealings with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey in respect of either:

- the application and assessment process;
- payments and payment plans;
- changes in circumstances; and
- a formal complaint.

Clients who had no contact in respect of any of the above touch-points were routed through to the end of the questionnaire.

The results show that, of the 4,006 clients surveyed:

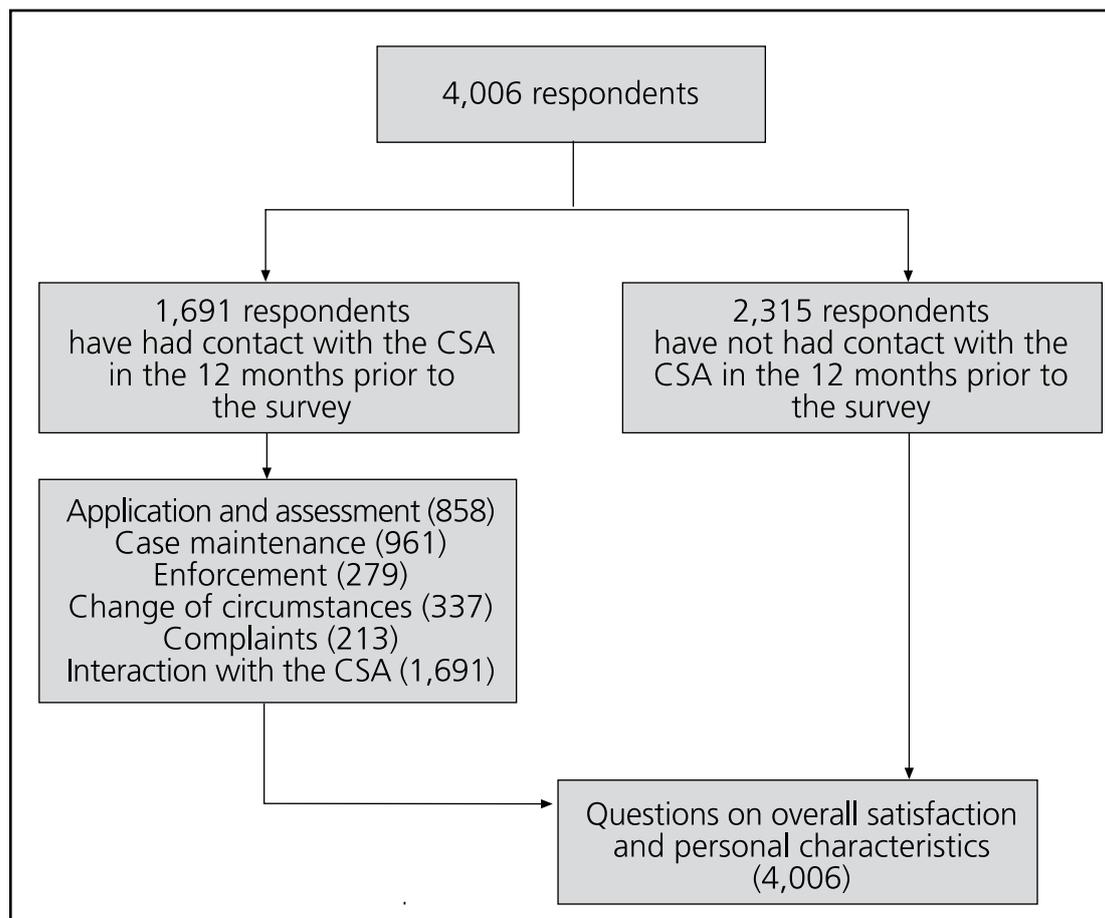
- 1,691 respondents (42 per cent – weighted) have had contact with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey with respect to one or more of the four touch-points listed above; and
- 2,315 respondents (58 per cent – weighted) have had no dealings with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey with respect to any of the four touch-points listed above.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Therefore, these findings should be caveated with the fact some of the 2,315 respondents may have had dealings about some other issue, over and above the four listed above. But as this was not specifically asked in the questionnaire we cannot comment on this.

The number of clients responding to each of the main sets of questions on elements of CSA service encountered in their client journey during the 12 months prior to the survey is shown in Figure 3.1. Section 3.4 provides further analysis of the data of those who did and did not have contact with the CSA by client type.

**Figure 3.1 Routing throughout the questionnaire**

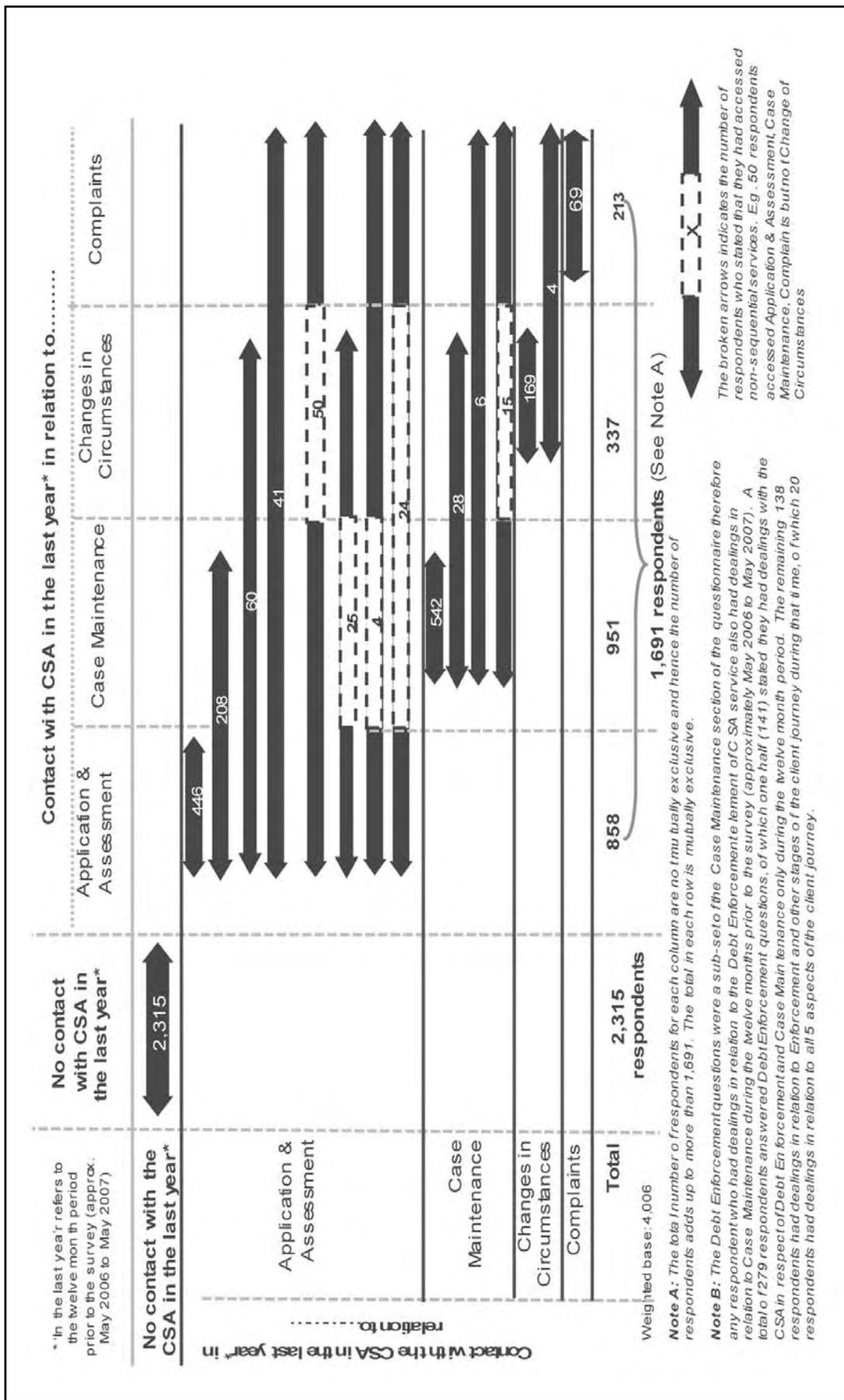


Of the 4,006 CSA clients surveyed, 58 per cent stated that they have had no contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), which was a figure larger than anticipated at the survey design stage. This cohort of clients was only asked questions at the end of the questionnaire in relation to overall satisfaction with the Agency.<sup>59</sup> Those 42 per cent of respondents who did have contact with the Agency were asked for their views on the elements of service they experienced with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007). As shown in Figure 3.2 of the 1,691 respondents, 446 had contact in relation to the initial 'application and assessment' stage only, and therefore, were unable to comment on any other aspect of the CSA services, whereas 20 respondents had been through all elements of the CSA service in their client journey during that 12-month period.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> As well as background characteristics which were asked of all 4,006 respondents.

<sup>60</sup> See Note B in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2 Elements of CSA service experienced by respondents



The majority of those who have had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey have had dealings in relation to the application and assessment process only (26 per cent), case maintenance issues only (32 per cent) or both these stages (12 per cent). The remaining respondents have accessed either the two remaining elements of CSA service only (changes of circumstances or complaints) or other mixes of the various stages. A table setting out the percentage of respondents accessing different elements of CSA service is presented in Appendix D (Table D.1). As set out in Table 3.2 the majority of respondents (73 per cent) have only had dealings with the CSA in relation to one element of CSA service. A minority of two per cent of respondents have had dealings with all four elements of CSA service.<sup>61</sup> This illustrates that most survey respondents have experienced shorter client journeys and it is likely that their views of the CSA, on the whole, will be influenced by that experience. This is explored more fully in later parts of this section where relevant.

**Table 3.2 Number of touch-points with the CSA**

<b>Number of touch-points accessed by respondents in the 12 months prior to the survey (May 2006 to May 2007)</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
One	1,226	73
Two	304	18
Three	120	7
Four	41	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,691</b>	<b>100</b>

For the majority of those who have had contact with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), the Agency contacted them directly (44 per cent) or the client contacted the CSA directly (38 per cent). The remaining respondents stated that contact came about as a result of referral from another organisation, the other partner, solicitor or for some other reason (18 per cent).

For those who contacted the Agency directly, the main reasons cited were in relation to being unable to organise a suitable maintenance arrangement without the help of the CSA (37 per cent) as shown in Table 3.3. It is worth noting that these findings highlight the critical role the CSA plays in mediating child maintenance arrangements in potentially difficult circumstances, where problems had arisen with payments or the relationship between both parents had deteriorated.

<sup>61</sup> The four stages referred to here exclude enforcement as it was asked as a sub-set of case maintenance in the survey and therefore, cannot be reported on separately if the results here are to remain mutually exclusive.

**Table 3.3 Rationale for contacting the CSA**

<b>Rationale for approaching the CSA</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents %</b>
You were unable to arrange a suitable maintenance arrangement with the other parent without the CSA	326	37
Your relationship with the other parent had deteriorated	132	15
You were experiencing problems with payment arrangements that were already in place	129	15
You wanted a formal arrangement to be put in place by a third party	101	12
Another reason/refused/cannot remember	75	9
There was a change in your financial circumstances or the financial circumstances of the other parent	67	8
Payments arranged through the CSA had stopped due to a systems problem	45	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>874</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3.4 Clients with no contact in the 12 months prior to the survey

In Table 3.4 the characteristics of those who have and those who have not had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) are presented. The result shows that:

- a slightly higher proportion of NRPs had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey than PWCs;
- a higher proportion of clients who have a paying case or non-paying case are more likely to contact the CSA than those who have no payment expected. This is justified as this latter category includes clients who are nil assessed or maintenance direct clients;
- of those clients contacting the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey, a larger proportion were on bad terms with the other parent; and
- comparing those who had contact with the Agency and those who had no contact, responses were similar in relation to the level of NRP contact with the child, and there were also similar proportions of clients under new and old CSA rules.

**Table 3.4 Characteristics of those in/out of contact with the Agency**

Number of respondents	Number of responses			Percentage of responses		
	Contact with Agency	No contact with Agency	Total	Contact with Agency %	No contact with Agency %	Total %
<b>Client type</b>						
PWC	820	1,206	2,025	48	52	51
NRP	872	1,109	1,981	52	48	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,691</b>	<b>2,315</b>	<b>4,006</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Intake type</b>						
Non-benefit	441	336	777	34	23	28
Benefit	862	1,118	1,980	66	77	72
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,303</b>	<b>1,454</b>	<b>2,757*</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>CSA rules</b>						
Old	711	907	1,618	42	39	40
New	980	1,408	2,388	58	61	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,691</b>	<b>2,315</b>	<b>4,006</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Compliance status</b>						
Paying	736	839	1,575	44	36	39
Not paying	303	234	537	18	10	13
No payment expected	652	1,241	1,893	39	54	47
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,691</b>	<b>2,315</b>	<b>4,006</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Relationship with other partner</b>						
Good terms	421	804	1,225	25	35	31
Neither	295	355	650	17	15	16
Bad terms	286	220	507	17	10	13
No contact	637	800	1,437	38	35	36
Refused/N/A	53	134	187	3	6	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,691</b>	<b>2,315</b>	<b>4,006</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Level of contact with child</b>						
Regular Contact	934	1,283	2,217	55	55	55
Infrequent Contact	215	249	464	13	11	12
No contact	509	672	1,182	30	29	29
Refused/N/A	33	110	143	2	5	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,691</b>	<b>2,315</b>	<b>4,006</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

\* Please note this cell does not add up to 4,006 as the CSA records do not hold intake type for old rules clients and that figures are weighted.

These findings illustrate that in comparison to those not in contact, a larger proportion of CSA clients in contact with the Agency are paying or receiving child maintenance. A comparatively larger proportion of clients who have been in contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), were on bad terms with the other parent. Almost one-fifth are also not paying child maintenance where a payment is expected and nearly a third have no contact with the child. These factors suggest that a substantial proportion of respondents may have more challenging personal circumstances and potentially more difficult cases. What is not clear is the proportion of time and attention required for cases that are not paying, and cases in potentially more difficult circumstances, in comparison to more straightforward cases. The impact of these factors on the experience of the clients on these cases is explored in later parts of this report where relevant.

The profile of those who are not in contact with the Agency is largely similar to those in contact – this is as expected. For example, 70 per cent of the CSA client base are benefit intake clients so greater proportions of benefit intake clients across the board would be expected and the sample was constructed to have more new rules clients and, therefore, greater proportions of new rules clients are to be expected. The exceptions are around payment and relationship factors where there are comparatively more clients with a no payment expected status and less clients not paying in the group that have not been in contact. Half of those not in contact are on good/ambivalent terms with the other parent. It is unclear if any of these factors are related to the lack of contact and, therefore, it could be suggested that there has been no activity requiring contact regarding service provision in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007).



# 4 Application and assessment

## 4.1 Introduction

Application and assessment is the first element of Child Support Agency (CSA) service as indicated in Figure 4.1. There are two main routes through which clients can contact the CSA – one relates to clients who are in receipt of social security benefits (known as benefit intake clients) and the other relates to those clients who are employed or financially independent (known as non-benefit intake clients). In particular:

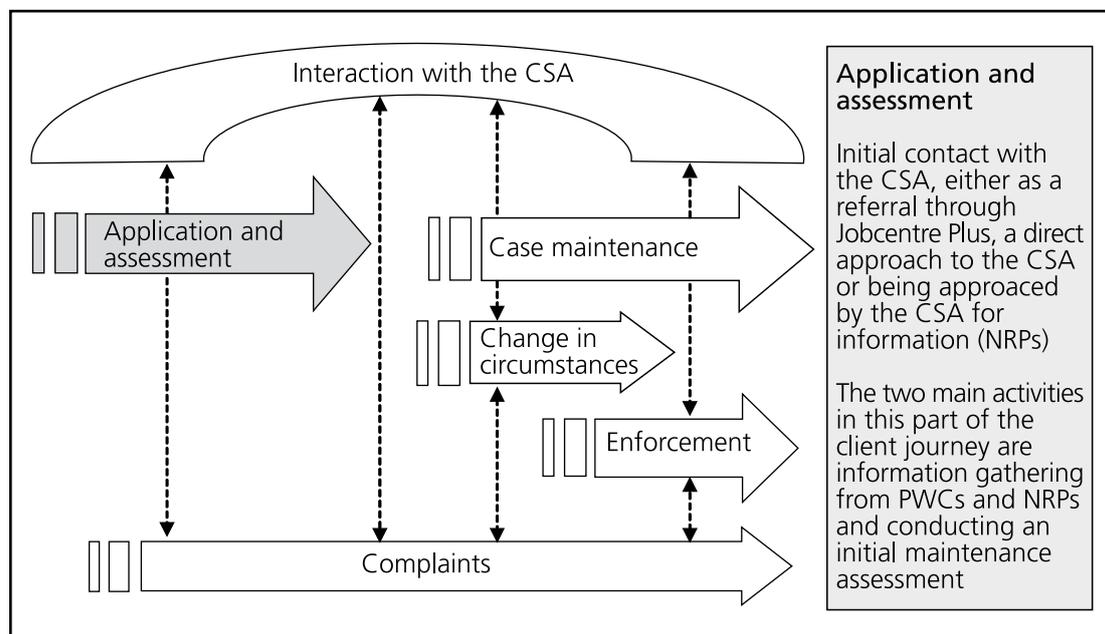
- benefit intake clients are referred to the CSA by Jobcentre Plus and are obliged to arrange child maintenance through the CSA. Therefore, a parent with care (PWC) in receipt of benefits is automatically sent CSA application forms by Jobcentre Plus;<sup>62</sup> and
- non-benefit intake clients contact the CSA directly to apply. A PWC or a non-resident parent (NRP) may make an application to the CSA, however, in the vast majority of cases it is the PWC who makes the initial contact with the Agency. The client who applies is asked to provide sufficient basic information about the other parent to enable the CSA to contact them.

For new rules clients, once information relating to NRP income, benefits and dependants has been collected, an assessment of child maintenance is calculated at a rate determined by net weekly income, the number of children they currently have living with them, the number of children they must pay maintenance for, and whether the child in question stays with the NRP for at least one night per week.

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<sup>62</sup> Under the child maintenance policy redesign, by the end of 2008, the requirement that PWCs claiming benefit be treated as applying for child maintenance will be removed. This will allow parents to take responsibility for making their own maintenance arrangements in a way which suits them and their children best.

**Figure 4.1 Position of the application and assessment stage within the elements of CSA service**



This section examines the quantitative survey findings in relation to application and assessment, and is structured under the following headings:

- **profile of respondents** – this provides an overview of the types of respondents who answered questions about this element of their client experience. The profile includes all the information set out in Table 3.1, for example, data on client type, intake type and current state of relationship with other partner. It also explains the number of elements of CSA service that respondents have experienced;
- **how important was this to clients?**<sup>63</sup> – respondents were asked to rate the importance of aspects of service delivery. Ratings were from 'not important at all', 'not very important', 'no strong opinion', 'quite important', 'extremely important' to 'don't know';
- **clients' views on the performance of the CSA**<sup>64</sup> – respondents were asked to state their view on how well the CSA had performed in relation to a number of aspects relating to service provision. For each statement respondents were asked to state if they 'disagreed strongly', 'disagreed slightly', 'had no strong opinion', 'agreed slightly', 'agreed strongly' or stated that they 'didn't know';

<sup>63</sup> The focus groups helped inform which aspects of CSA provision drove client satisfaction and helped develop the importance and performance questions in the survey for each stage of the client journey.

<sup>64</sup> The rationale for asking both importance and performance was that the differences between the two could be mapped to identify areas for improvement in relation to the application and assessment process.

- **overall satisfaction** – clients were asked to rate how satisfied they were with each entire element of CSA service, for example the overall application and assessment process. Satisfaction results are presented out of a maximum score of 5, where 5 out of 5 is ‘very satisfied’ and 1 out of 5 is ‘very dissatisfied’;
- **relationship between performance and satisfaction** – this sub-section explores to what extent performance is related to overall satisfaction levels;
- **comparison of performance and importance measures** and
- **summary** – summarises the key findings and conclusions from the section.<sup>65</sup>

## 4.2 Profile of respondents

The survey captured 1,020<sup>66</sup> respondents<sup>67</sup> who had some form of contact with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), in relation to the application and assessment processes. These individuals were identified by responding positively to the question ‘*Have you contacted or been contacted by the CSA in the last year about your CSA application or child maintenance assessment or calculation?*’ In terms of the weighted responses (858), this means that just over half of those (51 per cent) who had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey, were in contact regarding the application and assessment process. This suggests quite a large number of people

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<sup>65</sup> In each sub-section the data has been analysed to present numerical results for the importance and performance findings, in particular, the mean importance scores were calculated out of 5 where 1 is ‘not important at all’ and 5 is ‘extremely important’ and the mean performance scores were calculated out of 5 where 1 signifies ‘weak performance’ and 5 indicates ‘strong performance’. These numerical values were used for the importance and performance findings, as opposed to saying ‘per cent strongly agreed’, because it allowed us to illustrate results on a clear five-point scale and also enabled clear comparisons of results across each aspect of the service delivery. The survey included a number of questions which asked about levels of satisfaction and for these responses the findings have been presented in terms of the proportion of respondents who stated that they were very satisfied, quite satisfied, neither/nor, quite satisfied and very dissatisfied. In addition we have calculated mean satisfaction scores out of 5 where 5 signifies ‘very satisfied’ and 1 indicates ‘very dissatisfied’. Again, this allows a comparison of satisfaction scores across each stage of the journey.

<sup>66</sup> Which equates to 858 respondents in the weighted version of the achieved sample.

<sup>67</sup> In this sub-section and in all subsequent sections on profile of respondents, the percentages are calculated out of the 1,691 respondents who had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007).

engaged with the Agency for the first time in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared to the amount already on the caseload. This is because not all of those clients who apply necessarily move to having a positive maintenance calculation with the Agency, and even if they do, there is always a possibility that they may move onto maintenance direct.

Just over one-half (52 per cent) of all respondents to the application and assessment questions stated that they only experienced this element of CSA service, whereas the remaining 48 per cent have also experienced other<sup>68</sup> elements of CSA service in their client journey in the 12 months prior to the survey. On balance more were new rules clients than old rules clients (60 per cent compared to 40 per cent). This is as would be expected given that application and assessment would be the first element of CSA service that a 'new' client (who would be subject to the 'new rules') would experience. The relatively high number of old rules clients was a surprising statistic and there could be any number of explanations, including clients with existing cases which are still being resolved or clients who may have an additional case with the CSA.

From the client's perspective (see Table 3.3), the motivation given for approaching the CSA was largely and most frequently because they were unable to arrange maintenance without the CSA's help, or because they wanted a formal arrangement put in place with a third party (49 per cent<sup>69</sup>). More than one-half of respondents reported that the NRP had regular contact with their child; however, almost one-third reported no NRP contact at all. In addition, over one-half of all respondents (54 per cent) reported that they currently have a poor relationship with the other parent whilst 22 per cent reported a generally good relationship. Therefore, the rationale for contacting the Agency may, in part, be due to the personal circumstances of clients (e.g. mediating role between PWC and NRP in respect of child maintenance). For most clients, the Agency was the first point of contact for seeking child maintenance, for example, 59 per cent of those who had contact with the CSA in respect of application and assessment, had no previous maintenance arrangement in place.

Looking back to the profile of the overall sample set out earlier, it is evident that those who have had an application or assessment in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), had generally poorer relationships

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<sup>68</sup> A further 24 per cent have also been through case maintenance process; seven per cent have been through application and assessment as well as case maintenance and a change of circumstances; five per cent have been through all these stages plus the complaints process; the other 12 per cent have been through the complaints process as well as the application and assessment process.

<sup>69</sup> Composite figure.

with the NRP.<sup>70</sup> However, the level of contact between the child and the NRP was on average more frequent than within the sample as a whole. In addition a slightly higher proportion moved onto maintenance direct as the payment mechanism compared to CSA's collection service. These would have been clients using the CSA to agree a maintenance amount and then the NRP pays maintenance directly to the PWC.

**Table 4.1 Profile of respondents to assessment and application questions**

Segment	Client/case type	Percentage of respondents
Case type	Client type	PWC (52%) and NRP (48%)
	Intake type	Benefit intake clients (51%), non-benefit intake clients (28%) and unknown (21%)
	CSA rules	Old rules (40%) and new rules (60%)
Demographics	Ethnicity	White (91%), BME, Asian and other (6%) and refused (3%)
	Disability <sup>1</sup>	Yes (14%), no (84%) and refused (2%)
Case status	Payment type	Collection (82%) and maintenance direct (18%)
	Previous maintenance arrangement	Yes (41%) and no (59%)
	Compliance status*	Paying (39%), not paying (18%) and no payment expected (41%)
Relationship status	Previous relationship status	Married (50%), living together (23%) and other (27%)
	Current relationship with other parent	Generally good (23%), generally poor (54%), neither (19%) and refused (4%)
	Reported level of contact NRP has with child(ren) <sup>2</sup>	Frequent (57%), infrequent (10%), no contact at all (31%) and refused (2%)

Weighted base 858, unweighted base 1,020.

Figures in table may not add to 100% due to rounding.

\* Paying – positive maintenance calculation and full payment received/paid on the case; not paying – positive maintenance calculation and the full payment has not been received/paid on the case; no payment expected – case is either assessed not charging, nil assessed or maintenance direct (see Chapter 1 and the Glossary for further detail).

<sup>1</sup> The disability question asked was: 'Q19 Do you have any long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity that gives you substantial difficulties in any aspect of your day to day life? By long standing, I mean anything that has troubled you over a period of at least 12 months or is likely to affect you over a period of 12 months?'

<sup>2</sup> This is based on both PWC and NRP opinion.

<sup>70</sup> This is a feature of the sample who had been in contact in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), i.e. a greater proportion of those in contact regarding any stage of the journey had poorer relationships with the other parent.

### 4.3 How important was this to clients?

It is clear that this element of CSA service, as with all elements<sup>71</sup> which may be experienced by a client in their journey with the CSA, is viewed by clients as being 'extremely important' (Table 4.2). In particular, over 70 per cent rated each aspect of the service provided within the application and assessment stage as 'extremely important' (resulting in mean score 4.59 out of 5). Within this, the aspect to which clients attributed most importance (based on 'extremely important' responses) was processing applications and assessments accurately; and the aspect to which they attributed least importance, in relative terms, was understanding how the maintenance is calculated.

Further detailed analysis of the responses made by the various sub-groups in the sample indicated, in some instances, slight variations in the importance attributed to each aspect of the application and assessment process (Appendix D, Table D.2). For instance:

- for new rules clients, understanding the maintenance amount was relatively more important than for old rules clients (87 per cent compared to 79 per cent respectively);
- PWCs and NRPs had largely consistent views on the importance of each aspect; the largest difference, in relative terms, related to being kept informed of how the assessment/application was progressing (90 per cent compared with 83 per cent respectively); and
- in addition, non-benefit intake clients, new rules clients and paying clients largely rated the importance of the application and assessment higher across all areas of service than the other groups within the sample. This suggests comparatively higher expectations in these groups.

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<sup>71</sup> Comparisons of the mean importance scores across all service elements are discussed later in Chapter 10.

**Table 4.2 Views on levels of importance attached to application and assessment processes**

How important or unimportant was it that...	Not important at all %	Not very important %	No strong opinion %	Quite important %	Extremely important %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA processed the application and assessment accurately?	3	2	4	6	83	3	4.67
The CSA treated information provided with care?	2	1	7	10	79	1	4.64
The CSA processed your application and assessment within a reasonable period of time?	3	1	5	14	74	2	4.57
The CSA kept you informed of how your application and assessment was progressing?	3	3	6	11	75	2	4.55
You understood how the CSA calculated the maintenance amount?	3	3	5	13	71	4	4.52
Average mean score:							4.59

Weighted base: 858 respondents who answered application and assessment questions, unweighted base: 1,020.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest importance and calculating a mean score.

Figures in table may not add to 100% due to rounding.

#### 4.4 Clients' views on the performance of the Child Support Agency

The CSA performed comparatively quite well regarding treating information with care, where six out of ten clients felt that the CSA had performed well (57 per cent agreed and 27 per cent disagreed). With regard to understanding the maintenance amount and processing the assessment accurately, around 40 per cent of respondents agreed that the CSA had delivered and similar proportions disagreed (a slightly greater proportion agreed than disagreed).

The poorest performing aspect was in relation to keeping clients informed about progress (Table 4.3) where over half of clients (53 per cent) disagreed that the CSA had delivered on this aspect of service. The comparatively poorer performance in this aspect has adversely influenced the overall performance rating for this element of CSA service. This would suggest that this aspect may be an area for improvement, and this is further evidenced later in this section when relationships between performance, importance and overall satisfaction are explored.

Across all elements of CSA service, the mean performance scores range from 1.88 to 3.20 (for complaints and case maintenance stages respectively) and the score for application and assessment lies towards the top end of these (2.99), hence it is one of the better performing areas of service provision. Likewise the gap between the mean importance and performance score for this element of service is quite low overall (1.6) – the gap between mean importance and performance scores range from 1.3 to 3.0 across all aspects of this service element.

**Table 4.3 Views on levels of performance in respect of application and assessment processes**

To what extent do you agree or disagree that...	Disagree strongly %	Disagree slightly %	No strong opinion %	Agree slightly %	Agree strongly %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA treated information provided with care?	21	6	13	15	42	4	3.54
You understood how the CSA calculated the maintenance amount?	32	8	10	14	30	6	3.01
The CSA processed the application and assessment accurately?	34	8	9	13	31	5	2.97
The CSA processed your application and assessment within a reasonable period of time?	39	8	8	15	27	3	2.83
The CSA kept you informed of how your application and assessment was progressing?	43	10	9	12	22	3	2.58
Average mean score:							2.99

Weighted base: 858 respondents who answered application and assessment questions, unweighted base: 1,020.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest agreement with the statement and calculating a mean score.

Figures in table may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Further analysis of the responses provided by the various sub-groups, indicated, in some instances, slight variations in the assessment of performance attributed to each aspect of the application and assessment process. The detailed analysis is presented in Appendix D, but by way of summary:

- PWCs rated performance in treating information provided with care higher than NRPs (61 per cent compared with 52 per cent respectively, Table D.10 in Appendix D);
- those clients who were paying at the time of the survey rated performance more positively across the board than those clients with cases which were not paying, which is as would be expected. However, performance ratings were still poor with regard to keeping clients informed of progress (Table D.10);
- new rules clients consistently rated performance more positively than old rules clients<sup>72</sup> (Table D.10);
- respondents were asked for views on the performance of the CSA in terms of handling applications and assessments within a reasonable timeframe. The results indicate that those who had an arrears built up in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) rated performance less positively than those with no arrears (68 per cent and 43 per cent respectively). Likewise they also rated keeping clients informed of progress less positively (69 per cent and 56 per cent respectively);
- those clients generally on good or mixed<sup>73</sup> terms with the other parent rated performance higher than those clients generally on poor terms or who have no contact with the other parent across most aspects of application and assessment. This may suggest that those with more positive personal circumstances are having a more positive experience of the CSA (Table D.28);
- across the board, those with regular or frequent child contact rated the performance of the application and assessment process more positively than those with infrequent or no contact with the child. Again, this may suggest that those with more positive personal circumstances are having a better experience of the CSA (Table D.28); and
- those clients who reported having a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity rated the performance of the CSA lower in all aspects of the application and assessment process than those who had no such illness. However, it may suggest that the service at this initial stage needs to be more tailored to cater for the needs of these clients (Table D.28).

The data was also analysed to compare the views on performance of the application and assessment process between those who had only answered this section of the

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<sup>72</sup> This may reflect that clients under the new rules are subject to less complicated calculation formulae.

<sup>73</sup> Sometimes good, sometimes poor.

questionnaire (446) and the remaining respondents who had stated that they had been through application and assessment plus one or more other stages (412).<sup>74</sup> The results show that those respondents who had experience of the application and assessment process only were more positive in respect of three out of the five statements on application and assessment, compared to those who had experienced further service elements:

- treating information with care (63 per cent compared to 50 per cent);
- processing referrals/applications accurately (49 per cent compared to 37 per cent); and
- processing referrals/applications within a reasonable time period (47 per cent compared to 36 per cent)

## 4.5 Overall satisfaction

Respondents were asked to comment on their overall satisfaction with the performance of the CSA with regard to this element of service provision, the results of which are set out in Figure 4.2. In line with performance ratings, one-third of respondents were satisfied with the application and assessment process. The mean score<sup>75</sup> for overall satisfaction with this element of CSA service was 2.45 (across application and assessment as a whole, these scores ranged from 1.56 to 2.93). The case maintenance and change of circumstance stages received higher satisfaction ratings.

It is evident that there are differences in opinion related to personal circumstances, for instance:

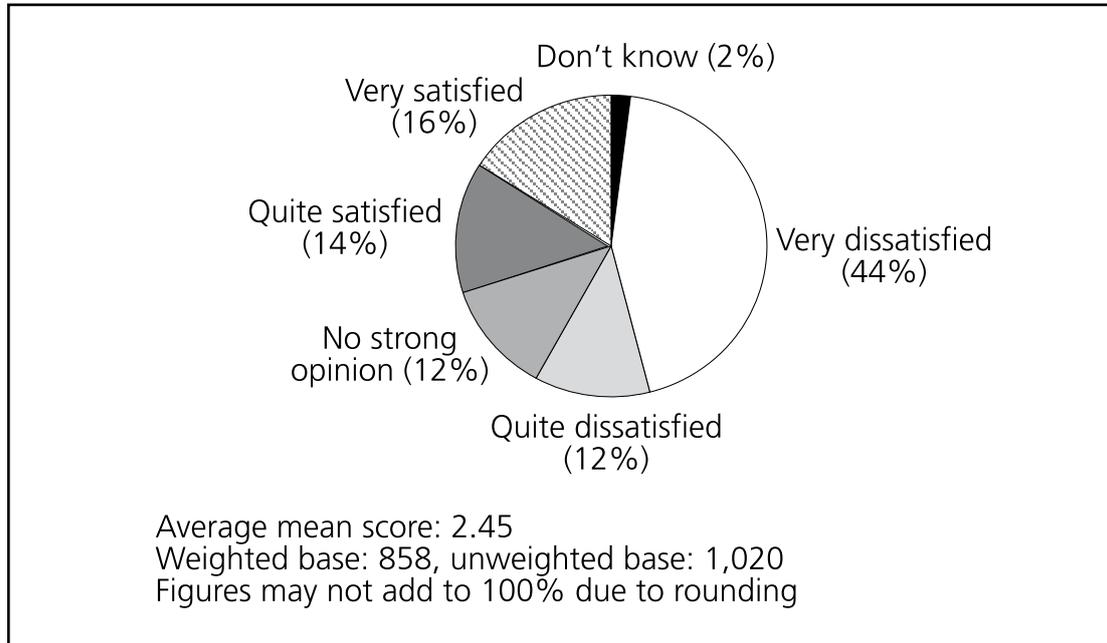
- slightly more NRPs (60 per cent) relative to PWCs (54 per cent) were dissatisfied (Figure D.7 in Appendix D);
- similarly, slightly more benefit intake clients (54 per cent) relative to non-benefit clients (50 per cent) reported dissatisfaction;
- there was a sharp increase in levels of dissatisfaction, where the relationship with the other partner was poor (60 per cent) and where there was no contact with the child (67 per cent) (Figure D.7); and
- old rules clients (65 per cent) relative to new rules clients (50 per cent) were also much more likely to be dissatisfied with this service element.

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<sup>74</sup> A total of 858 respondents for the application and assessment questions.

<sup>75</sup> Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest satisfaction and calculating a mean score.

**Figure 4.2 Overall satisfaction with the application and assessment process**

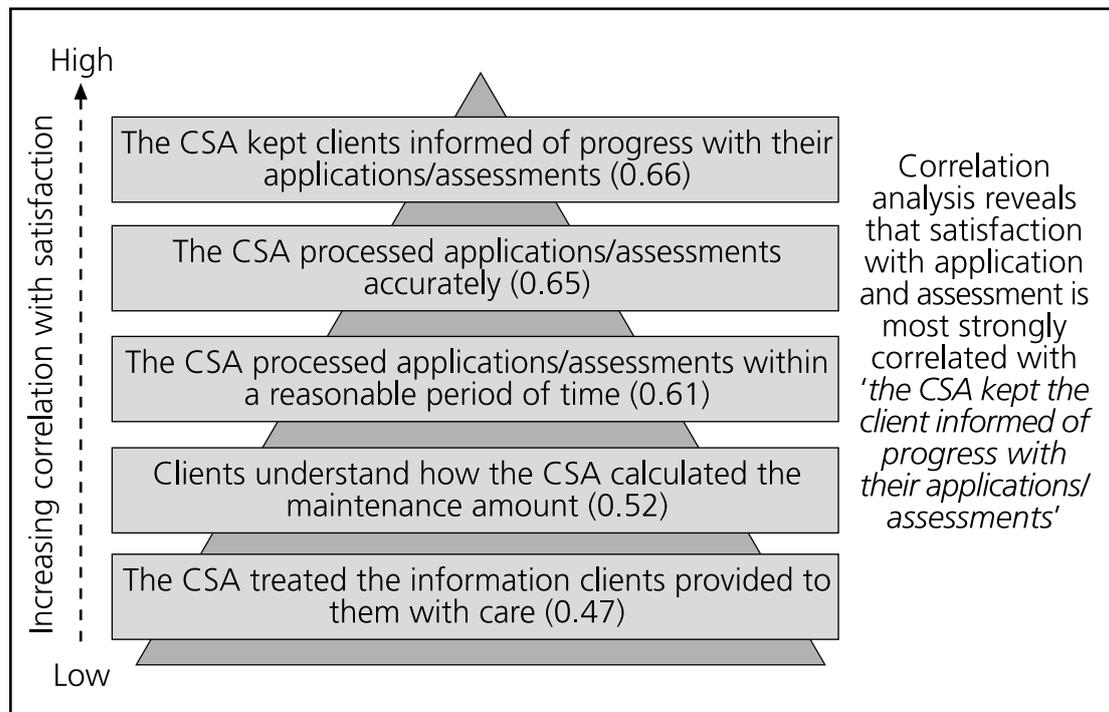


#### 4.6 Relationship between performance and satisfaction

The performance score was higher than the satisfaction score (2.99 compared to 2.45). Exploring the relationship between the performance ratings and overall satisfaction using correlation analysis – in effect exploring which particular aspects of the application and assessment process have the strongest relationship with satisfaction levels – goes some way to exploring this. Figure 4.3 presents the outputs of this relationship analysis. It is evident that keeping clients informed of progress was most strongly correlated with higher levels of satisfaction, closely followed by processing of applications/assessments in an accurate manner and within a reasonable period of time.

These were the issues that were most important to clients and where performance was comparatively poorer. Importance is a key factor in assessing overall satisfaction and these findings suggest that comparatively poorer performance in factors both important to clients and strongly correlated with satisfaction is adversely affecting satisfaction levels.

**Figure 4.3 Understanding relationships between application processes and satisfaction**



In summary, if the CSA were able to improve performance in these three related aspects of the application and assessment stage, it is likely that this would improve satisfaction levels.

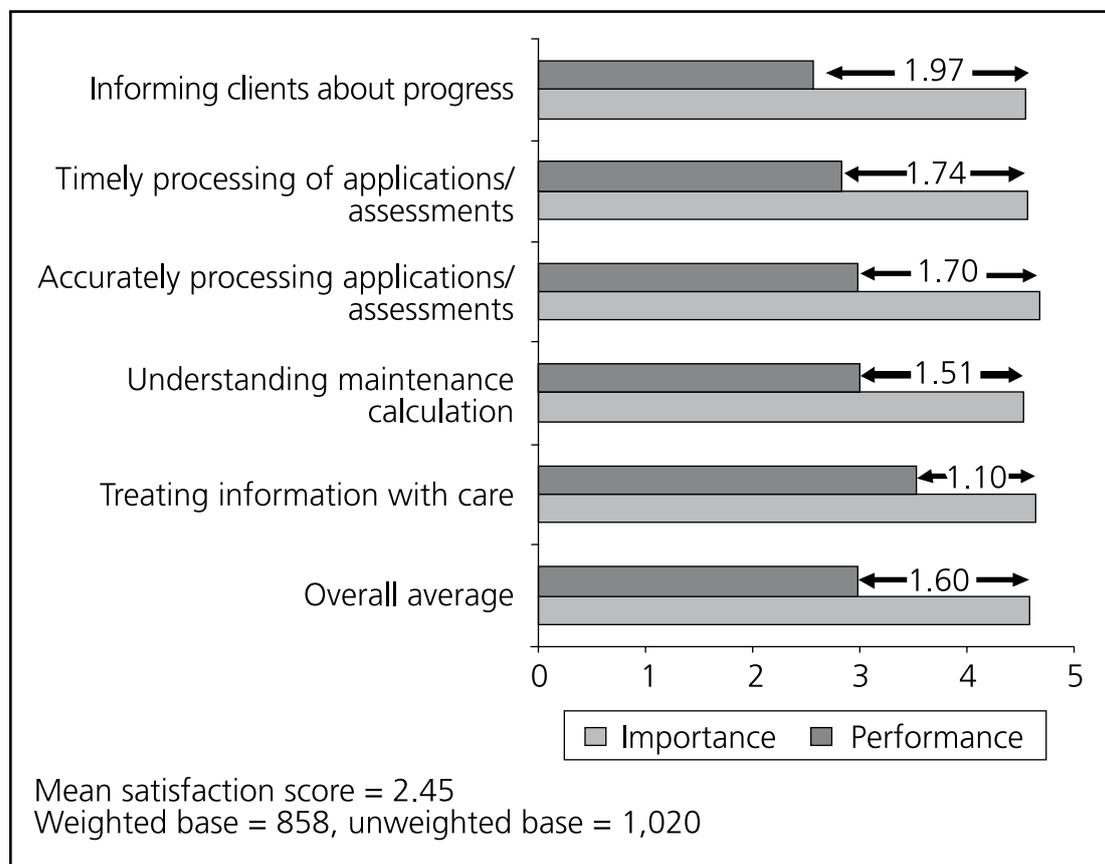
#### 4.7 Comparison of importance and performance measures

Analysing the performance ratings against the importance ratings (Figure 4.4) provides a mechanism for prioritising service aspects for improvement. This analysis yields a 'performance gap' and those aspects where the gaps are largest and importance highest, ought to be considered to be the priority areas in which improvements need to be made (Figure 4.4).

The overall gap between the mean performance and importance ratings is 1.60. The largest gaps in this stage relate to keeping clients informed about their case (1.97) and processing applications/assessments both within a reasonable time period (1.74) and accurately (1.70). Again, as will be seen later in this report, none of these gaps are amongst the ten largest gaps across all elements of CSA service.

These results further substantiate the findings of the correlation analysis above, where it was again evident, for instance, that keeping clients informed of progress, has the strongest relationship with satisfaction and where currently poor performance in this aspect is, in a sense, adversely affecting satisfaction levels.

**Figure 4.4 Difference between mean performance scores for application and assessment**



## 4.8 Summary

The analysis of the survey results with respect to the application and assessment process has highlighted that:

- of those who had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (1,691), about 60 per cent had contacted the Agency in respect of the application and assessment process;
- this element of CSA service was highly rated in terms of importance (evidenced by the fact that over 70 per cent of respondents thought all aspects of this service element were important). Within this the accurate processing of applications and assessments was thought to be most important;
- the best performing aspect was in respect of treating client information with care, and the poorest aspect was in relation to keeping clients informed of progress;
- 56 per cent of the clients who had recently experienced this element of service provision were dissatisfied. From a correlation analysis of performance levels against overall satisfaction, it is evident that keeping clients informed of progress and processing of applications and assessments accurately are two areas which are critical to improving satisfaction levels;

- linked to the above, potential areas for improvement for the CSA in this service element (based on the size of the 'gap' between the importance and performance ratings) are:
  - keeping clients informed about their case;
  - processing applications/assessments within a reasonable time period; and
  - processing applications/assessments accurately;
- there are pockets of client types whose performance ratings are generally, although not always, lower than other client types. Sometimes the factors driving these lower ratings are more in the realm of the personal circumstances of the client, rather than particular aspects of the performance of the CSA. It is not clear if it is the personal circumstances per se or that personal circumstances make for difficult cases which in turn adversely affects client experiences. However, there are some groups where satisfaction ratings are lower and personal circumstances prevail, where the CSA could potentially tailor the service to improve ratings; and
- finally, in the main, those respondents who had accessed only this CSA service element were more positive about performance than those who have accessed this plus other parts of the CSA service.

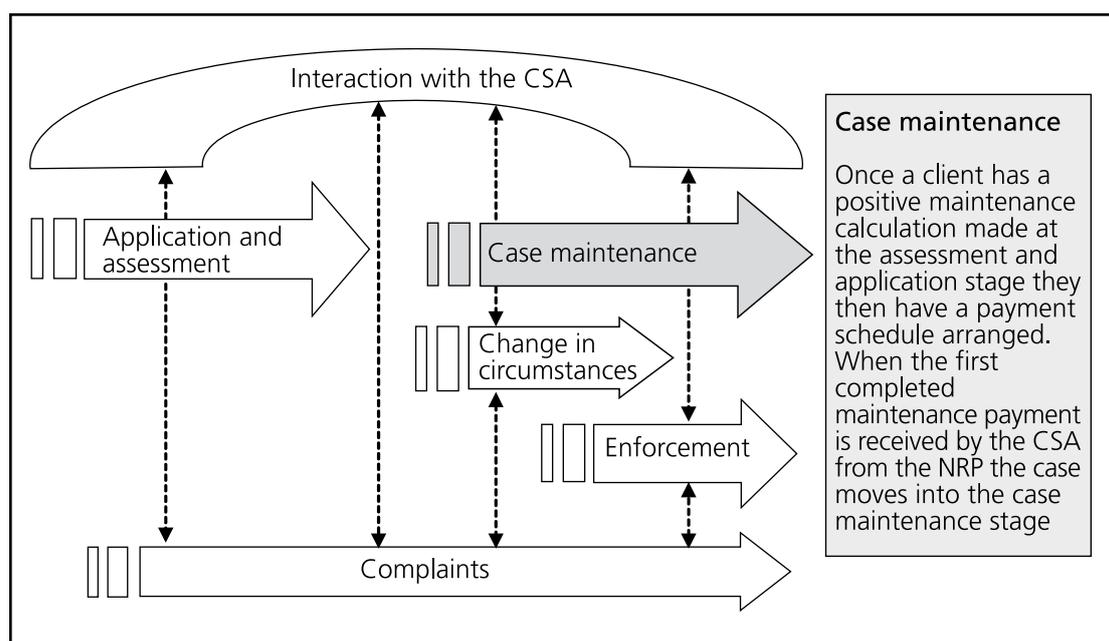


# 5 Case maintenance

## 5.1 Introduction

Once a client has a positive maintenance calculation made at the assessment and application stage they then have a payment schedule arranged. When the completed maintenance payment is received by the Child Support Agency (CSA) from the non-resident parent (NRP) the case moves into the case maintenance stage (Figure 5.1). The role of the CSA is then to process these payments and pay them to the parent with care (PWC) within three working days of receipt from the NRP. If these payments are not made according to the payment schedule set out by the CSA, or for the correct amount, the client is then moved into the 'debt enforcement' stage, views on which are discussed in the following section.

**Figure 5.1 Position of the case maintenance stage within the elements of CSA service**



This chapter presents the key survey findings in relation to case maintenance and is structured under the following headings:

- profile of respondents;
- how important was this to clients?;
- clients' views on the performance of the CSA;
- overall satisfaction;
- relationship between performance and satisfaction;
- areas for improvement; and
- summary.

## 5.2 Profile of respondents

The survey captured the views of 1,165 clients<sup>76</sup> who had had contact with the CSA in relation to the case maintenance process within the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007)<sup>77</sup>. This means that 56 per cent of all those who had contact with the Agency during this time were in contact with regards to the case maintenance process. In fact, out of all those who had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey, the highest proportion had contact in relation to case maintenance, followed closely by application and assessment (51 per cent).

Of these, nearly one in five respondents (18 per cent) had a relatively new relationship with the CSA, experiencing both the application and assessment and case maintenance service elements in their client journey in the 12 months prior to the survey. In contrast, nearly half (47 per cent) had experience of case maintenance only during this period, indicating that they have a longer-term relationship with the CSA.

There were slightly more NRPs than PWCs in the sample, and over half (52 per cent) were benefit intake clients. In comparison to the profile of all respondents, a high proportion of clients that were 'paying' responded to the case maintenance questions (45 per cent compared to 39 per cent) and a low proportion of those with 'no payment expected'.

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<sup>76</sup> This equates to 951 respondents in the weighted version of the achieved sample.

<sup>77</sup> Individuals were identified by responding positively to the question '*Have you contacted or been contacted by the CSA in the last year about your CSA payments and payment plan, including any problems you have encountered with these?*'.

In terms of personal circumstances, the majority of clients (54 per cent) indicated that the relationship with the other partner was 'generally poor'<sup>78</sup> whilst over one quarter of respondents had a 'generally good' relationship with the other parent (Table 5.1). There was an equal split between those clients who reported that the NRPs had frequent contact with their child and those who stated that the NRP had infrequent or no contact at all (49 per cent each).

Comparison of the profile of respondents to the case maintenance section of the survey to that of the overall sample highlights that they generally had poorer relationships with the other parent. It was also evident that within this component of the sample, there was a higher proportion of non-paying clients than in the overall sample.

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<sup>78</sup> This is a feature of the sample who had been in contact in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), i.e. a greater proportion of those in contact regarding any stage of the journey had poorer relationships with the other parent.

**Table 5.1 Profile of respondents to case maintenance questions**

Segment	Client/case type	Percentage of respondents
Case type	Client type	PWC (48%) and NRP (52%)
	Intake type	Benefit intake clients (52%), no-benefit intake clients (26%) and unknown (22%)
	CSA rules	Old rules (41%) and new rules (59%)
Demographics	Ethnicity	White (92%), BME, Asian and other (6%) and refused (2%)
	Disability <sup>1</sup>	Yes (15%), no (83%) and refused (2%)
Case status	Payment type	Collection (84%) and maintenance direct (16%)
	Previous maintenance arrangement	Yes (43%) and no (57%)
	Compliance status*	Paying (45%), not paying (20%) and no payment expected (35%)
Relationship status	Previous relationship status	Married (49%), living together (26%) other (23%) and refused (0%)
	Current relationship with other parent	Generally good (26%), generally poor (54%), neither (16%) and refused (3%)
	Reported level of contact NRP has with child(ren) <sup>2</sup>	Frequent (49%), infrequent (18%), no contact at all (31%) and refused (2%)

Respondents who answered case maintenance questions: weighted base 951, unweighted base 1,165.

Figures in table may not add to 100% due to rounding.

\* Paying – positive maintenance calculation and full payment received/paid on the case; not paying – positive maintenance calculation and the full payment has not been received/paid on the case; no payment expected – case is either assessed not charging, nil assessed or maintenance direct (see Chapter 1 and the Glossary for further detail).

<sup>1</sup> The disability question asked was: 'Q19 Do you have any long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity that gives you substantial difficulties in any aspect of your day to day life? By long standing, I mean anything that has troubled you over a period of at least 12 months or is likely to affect you over a period of 12 months?'

<sup>2</sup> This is based on both PWC and NRP opinion.

### 5.3 How important was this to clients?

Case maintenance is of high importance to clients, with at least two-thirds rating this CSA service element as 'extremely important' (mean score of 4.49).

Within this, the aspects attributed with the most importance by clients (based on 'extremely important' responses) were: ensuring that the correct payment/maintenance amounts were collected and taking prompt action to rectify any problems with payments/maintenance collection (Table 5.2). For each of these aspects at least ten per cent more clients agreed that they were 'extremely important' in comparison with the other two aspects in this service element (i.e. arranging a suitable payment/collection schedule and making sure payments/collections were on time).

Table 5.2 Views on levels of importance attached to case maintenance processes

How important or unimportant was it that...	Not important at all %	Not very important %	No strong opinion %	Quite important %	Extremely important %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA made sure payment amounts were correct/the correct amount of maintenance was collected?	3	2	5	10	78	4	4.63
The CSA took <b>prompt</b> and appropriate action to rectify any problems with your payments/maintenance collection?	4	2	5	9	76	5	4.60
The CSA made sure payments were/ collection of maintenance was/ <b>on time</b> ?	5	3	8	13	69	3	4.42
The CSA arranged a suitable payment/ collection/ <b>schedule</b> for you?	5	4	9	14	66	2	4.34
Average mean score:							4.49

Weighted base: 951 respondents who answered case maintenance questions, unweighted base: 1,165.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest importance and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Analysis of the responses across the sub-groups indicated that they were largely consistent across benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients, new and old rules clients and paying and non paying clients.

In relative terms, PWCs were of the opinion that all aspects of the case maintenance (in relative terms) were of more importance than NRPs. The largest differences in this opinion were:

- PWCs reported that a suitable payment/collection schedule arranged by the CSA was more important than NRPs (90 per cent compared to 73 per cent respectively); and
- PWCs considered that ensuring payments/collections were made on time was more important than NRPs (89 per cent compared to 77 per cent respectively).

While PWCs do place comparatively more importance on these factors, this is not to say that these factors were unimportant to NRPs, as approximately three-quarters considered these aspects of service to be important. This reflects focus group findings where PWCs expressed the view that having an agreed schedule and payments arriving on time were important, often due to household budgeting issues. NRPs also believed these factors to be important, again for personal budgeting reasons.

## 5.4 Clients' views on the performance of the Child Support Agency

Overall, just over one half of the respondents were positive about the CSA's performance in this service element. The main exception to this general trend was the aspect relating to the CSA taking prompt and appropriate action to rectify problems.

Overall, across all elements of CSA service, a higher proportion of clients 'strongly agreed' that the CSA performed in respect of case maintenance processes. For example, between 24 and 37 per cent strongly agreed that the CSA had performed well in respect of aspects of this service (Table 5.3). This service element received the highest mean performance score of 3.20 in comparison with all other elements of CSA service.

The CSA performed best in ensuring that payments/maintenance were collected on time, with over half (56 per cent) rating performance positively in this area. The difference between the views of PWCs and NRPs in this respect is that 60 per cent of NRPs agreed that collection of maintenance was on time, whereas only 50 per cent of PWCs agreed that payments were made on time.

The poorest performance (in relative terms) related to taking prompt and appropriate action to rectify any problems with payments/maintenance collection, with nearly one-half of respondents (46 per cent) negatively rating the performance of the CSA in this regard.

**Table 5.3 Views on levels of performance in respect of case maintenance processes**

To what extent do you agree or disagree that...	Disagree strongly %	Disagree slightly %	No strong opinion %	Agree slightly %	Agree strongly %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA made sure payments were/ collection of maintenance was/on time?	22	7	11	19	37	4	3.45
The CSA made sure payment amounts were correct/the correct amount of maintenance was collected?	26	9	10	15	36	4	3.28
The CSA arranged a suitable payment/ collection/schedule for you?	25	9	12	20	32	3	3.24
The CSA took prompt and appropriate action to rectify any problems with your payments/maintenance collection?	38	8	9	14	24	7	2.76
Average mean score:							3.20

Weighted base: 951 respondents who answered case maintenance questions, unweighted base: 1,165.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest agreement with the statement and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Further analysis of responses indicated differing views on the CSA's performance across some of the sub-groups. The detailed findings are set out in the Technical Annex, but by way of example:

- PWCs rated the performance of the CSA more positively than NRPs in three out of the four aspects of the case maintenance stage. In relation to the fourth aspect, ensuring that payments were made/maintenance was collected on time, PWCs were less positive than NRPs (50 per cent compared to 60 per cent respectively). This is supported by the focus group research, in which many PWCs reported problems with receipt of payments;
- performance ratings by benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients were broadly comparable in all aspects, with the exception of the CSA's performance in dealing with problems related to payments/maintenance collections which was rated more positively by benefit intake clients than non-benefit intake clients (39 per cent and 31 per cent respectively). This could be due to the fact that those NRP clients in receipt of benefits tend only to pay a flat rate of £5 per week in maintenance, which is a relatively straightforward payment service in comparison with the process for most non-benefit intake NRPs who must supply three months of payslips. However, we cannot be sure that this is the case;
- new rules clients were more positive than old rules clients (56 per cent compared to 44 per cent) about the performance of the CSA in ensuring that the payment/maintenance amounts were correct. This could possibly suggest that the new regime is working better than the previous system, those clients who have been with the CSA for longer are less satisfied, or that old rules clients may have issues around the accuracy of their payments;
- in terms of positive performance ratings for ensuring collections or payments were on time, those with a disability were more positive than those without a disability (65 per cent and 55 per cent respectively). This may be due to disabled clients being on benefits and their payments being part of their benefits payment process. It should be noted that 81 per cent of those with a registered disability are also on benefit. In contrast in relation to arranging a suitable collection/payment schedule those with an impairment were more negative than those without (40 per cent and 52 per cent respectively gave positive performance ratings); and
- broadly speaking, those clients who reported that they had a good relationship with the other parent, and NRPs who had regular contact with their child, were more positive about the performance of the CSA (39 per cent and 40 per cent respectively). Regarding this element of CSA service, this would suggest that more positive personal circumstances influence perceptions of the CSA's performance.

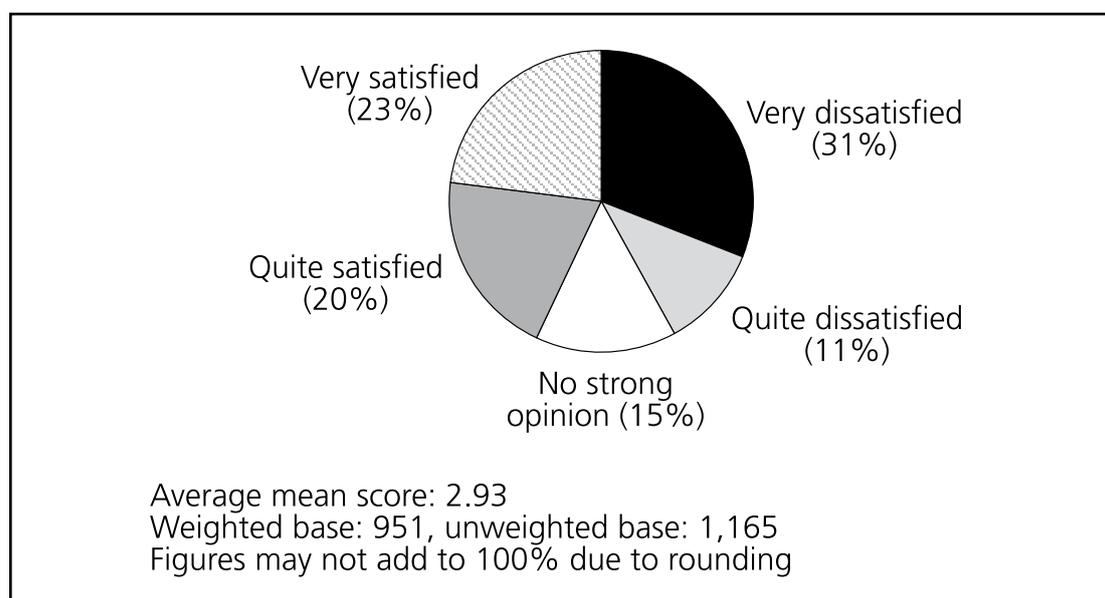
The findings were also analysed to compare the views on performance of the case maintenance process between those who had experience of case maintenance

only (542) and the remaining respondents who had experience of this and other aspects of service (409).<sup>79</sup> The results showed that across all the four statements on the case maintenance element of service, in the main there were no significant differences in opinion, with the exception of the question around rectifying problems with payments/maintenance collections. Forty-four per cent of clients who had only accessed case maintenance in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) agreed that the CSA performed well in this area of service provision, in comparison to those who had accessed this and other parts of the services – this would include debt enforcement and complaints clients, which could explain this difference in opinion.

## 5.5 Overall satisfaction

When respondents were questioned on their overall satisfaction with respect to this element of CSA service, there was an even balance between those who were satisfied (43 per cent) and those who were dissatisfied (42 per cent). The mean score<sup>80</sup> for overall satisfaction with the case maintenance process was 2.93 out of 5 which was the highest mean satisfaction score across all elements of CSA service (Figure 5.2).

**Figure 5.2 Overall satisfaction with the case maintenance process**



Similar to the application and assessment element, there are differences in opinion on satisfaction across sub-groups segmented by personal circumstances. For example:

<sup>79</sup> A total of 951 respondents for the case maintenance questions.

<sup>80</sup> Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest satisfaction and calculating a mean score.

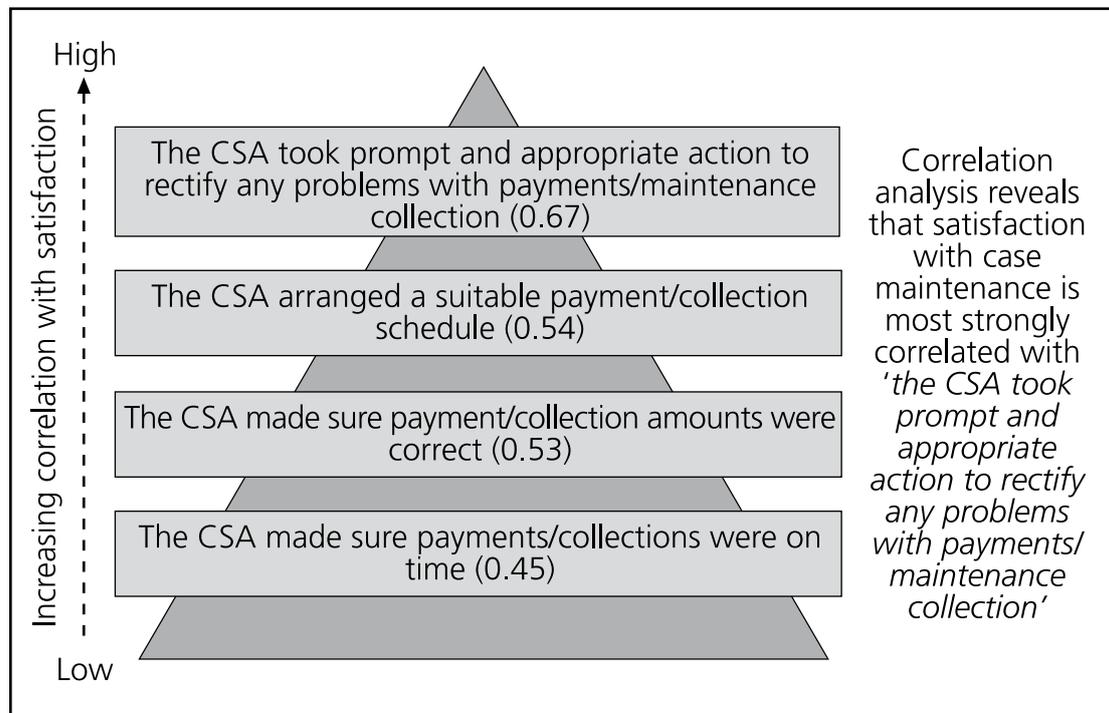
- significantly more NRPs were very dissatisfied with the case maintenance process than PWCs (39 per cent and 20 per cent respectively); and
- clients reporting no contact with the child and those that reported a poor relationship with the other parent were more dissatisfied than their counterparts.

This adds further weight to the earlier suggestion that the perspective of the client is related to their personal circumstances, which have an effect on their experience. This effect may be related to their priorities, e.g. it is likely that PWCs prioritise receiving accurate regular amounts as it is important to household budgeting. For example, where there is no contact between PWC and NRP, tracking down the NRP to secure payment may take more time and consequently delays in service provision will be experienced.

## 5.6 Relationship between performance and satisfaction

The results of the correlation analysis (Figure 5.3) show that taking prompt and appropriate action to rectify any problems with payment/maintenance collection had the strongest relationship with satisfaction. Taking prompt and appropriate action to rectify any problems was also the poorest performing aspect of service element and the second highest aspect in terms of importance to clients. Given the impact of importance on satisfaction levels, this may go some way towards explaining why the overall satisfaction score (2.93) is lower than the performance score (3.20) for this element of CSA service. The high priority attached by clients to the CSA taking prompt and appropriate action to **rectify** any problems reflects the desire of respondents that the CSA **resolves** the problem and identifies the underlying cause to avoid future repetitions, rather than simply **responding** in a prompt manner. In summary, it would appear that improving performance around this aspect would be likely to have a positive impact on overall satisfaction levels for the case maintenance stage.

**Figure 5.3 Understanding relationship between case maintenance and satisfaction**



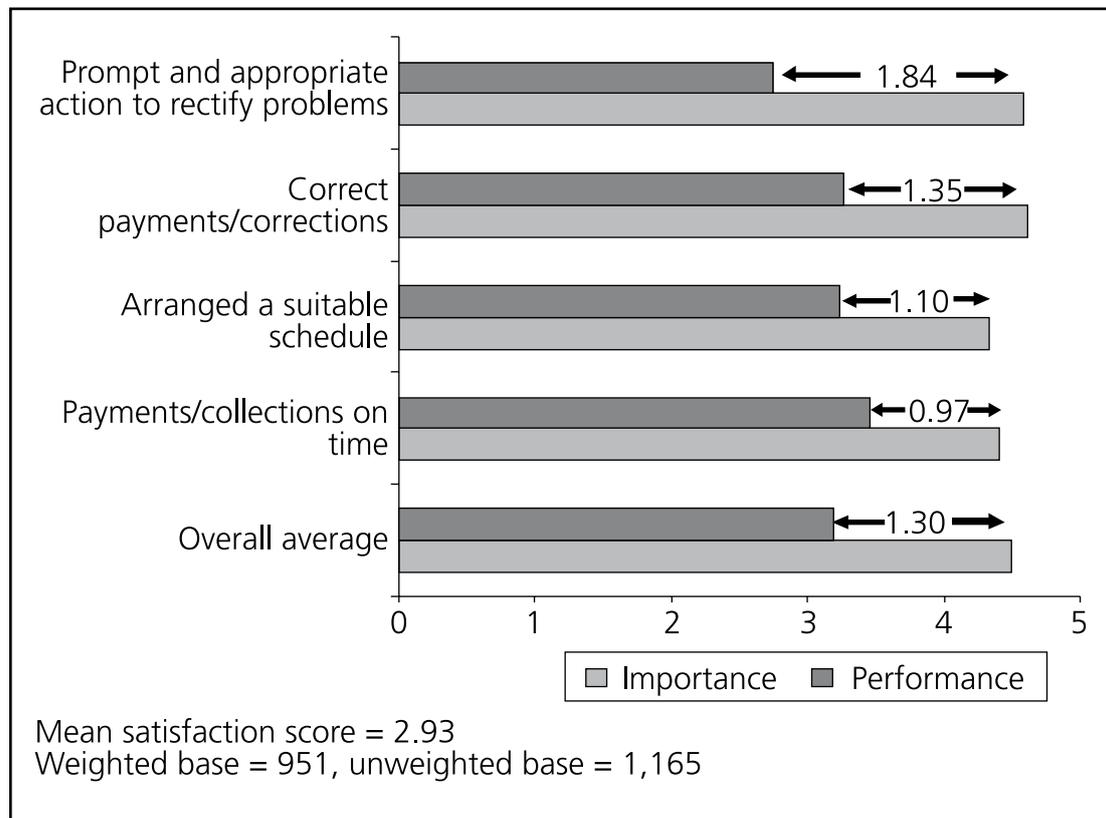
## 5.7 Comparison of importance and performance measures

Areas for improvement by the CSA in this service element can be identified by analysing the importance and performance ratings. The results of this analysis are illustrated in Figure 5.4.

There is an overall difference of 1.30 between the mean performance and importance ratings for the case maintenance process. Across all elements of CSA service, this stage has the smallest gap between importance and performance.<sup>81</sup> Within the case maintenance service element, the largest gaps between mean importance and performance scores are in relation to taking prompt and appropriate actions to rectify problems (gap of 1.84). This suggests that this should be a priority for improvement going forward. The remaining aspects of this service element (e.g. making sure payments/collection were on time) had some of the smallest gaps between mean importance and performance scores across all service elements. So, in relative terms, the case maintenance element performed more positively than other elements of service.

<sup>81</sup> The gaps range from 1.30 for this stage of the journey to 3.00 for the complaints stage.

**Figure 5.4 Difference between mean performance scores for case maintenance**



These results also support the findings of the correlation analysis in Figure 5.3, which indicated that taking prompt and appropriate actions to rectify problems had the strongest relationship with overall satisfaction, and that the relatively poor performance in this aspect was adversely affecting the overall satisfaction level.<sup>82</sup>

## 5.8 Summary

By way of summary, our analysis of the survey results in respect of the case maintenance service highlights that:

- 56 per cent of those in contact with the CSA were in contact in relation to the case maintenance process;
- the most important aspects of this service element were ensuring that the correct payment/maintenance amounts were collected and taking prompt action to rectify any problems with payments/maintenance collections;

<sup>82</sup> Since the survey has taken place, the Agency has taken steps to reorganise its case maintenance processes to seek to facilitate faster response times.

- just over one half of the respondents were positive about the CSA's performance in this element of service. The main exception to this general trend was the aspect relating to the CSA taking prompt and appropriate action to rectify problems;
- there was an even balance between those satisfied (43 per cent) and dissatisfied (42 per cent) and the correlation analysis indicated that taking prompt and appropriate action to rectify problems was key to improving satisfaction levels;
- based on a gap analysis of the performance ratings against the importance ratings, the priority areas for improvement in the case maintenance element of service are:
  - taking prompt and appropriate action to rectify problems; and
  - ensuring payment/collection amounts are correct;
- those with a poor relationship with the other partner and those NRPs with no contact with their child are more negative about the performance of the CSA in respect of aspects of the case maintenance processes. However, it may be the case that these difficult personal circumstances and any resentment at having to pay child maintenance in this situation may influence attitudes to CSA performance regarding case maintenance.

The findings regarding case maintenance show that clients primarily wanted the CSA to get payments right and fix problems promptly when they arise. Clients were experiencing difficulties in these areas and those with more challenging personal circumstances and, potentially, therefore, more difficult cases, were particularly negative regarding their case maintenance experience.



# 6 Debt enforcement

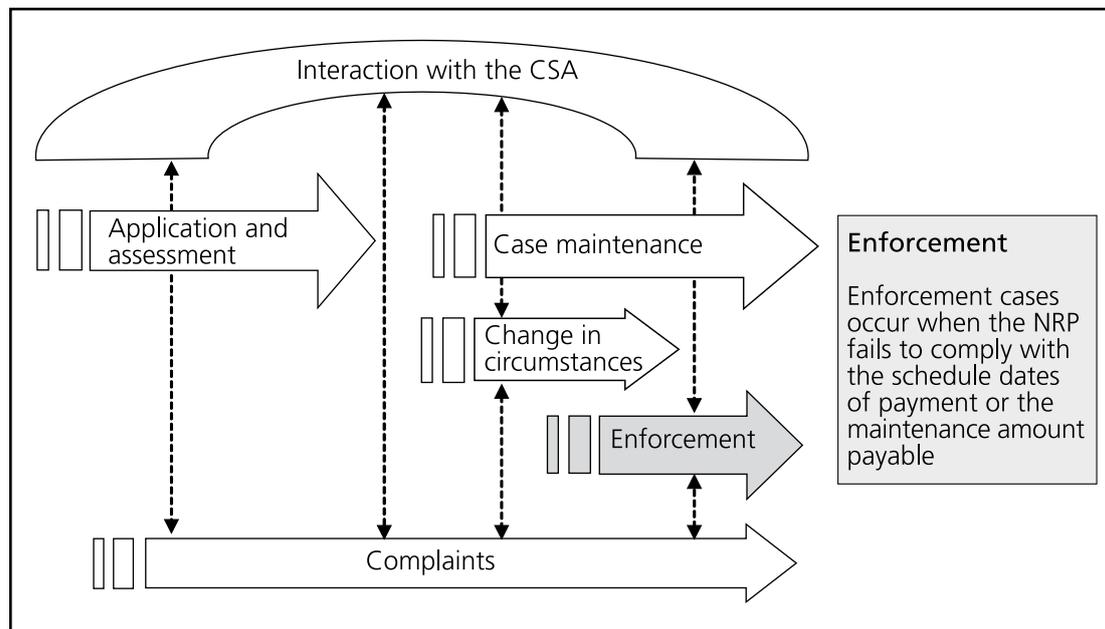
## 6.1 Introduction

A client's case moves into the debt enforcement stage when the non-resident parent (NRP) fails to fully or partially pay their maintenance amount, or comply with the schedule of payments set out by the Child Support Agency (CSA). In this research parents with care (PWCs) were also surveyed in instances where the NRP was not paying and, therefore, in debt enforcement. As such, for the purposes of this report, the PWCs case will also be referred to as debt enforcement, even though enforcement is not action that the Agency takes in relation to the PWC.

Generally, if a case is at the debt enforcement stage, this means that:

- the PWCs have not been receiving the amount of money agreed in the maintenance schedule or according to the timescale set out in the schedule. Hence, the PWCs are likely to be very frustrated as they are not receiving the money owed to them for their child(ren) – a clear finding from the focus group research; and
- on the other hand, the NRPs will be in a situation, for whatever reason, whereby they have not made the full payments or are behind the timetabled schedule of payments in respect of their child maintenance payments. Hence, they are being chased by the Agency for their payments and are likely to be frustrated because of this – also a finding from the focus group research.

**Figure 6.1** Position of the debt enforcement stage along the elements of CSA service



This chapter presents the key survey findings in relation to case maintenance and is structured under the following headings:

- profile of respondents;
- how important was this to clients?;
- clients' views on the performance of the CSA;
- overall satisfaction; and
- relationship between performance and satisfaction.

## 6.2 Profile of respondents

There were 364 respondents<sup>83</sup> who had been in contact with the CSA in relation to debt enforcement in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007).<sup>84</sup> This represents 17 per cent of those who had contact with the Agency during that period. Almost two-thirds of these were PWCs (relative to NRPs). Table 6.1 sets out the profile of clients who answered this section of the survey.

<sup>83</sup> This equates to 279 respondents in the weighted version of the achieved sample. Debt enforcement data may be subject to selection bias linked to the quota sampling approach as individuals self-identified.

<sup>84</sup> These individuals were identified by responding positively to the question 'Has there been a build up of arrears in your maintenance in the last year?' Respondents may be in cases where payments are not being made or may have had a resolution through Debt enforcement.

The initial reason for approaching the CSA for the majority of clients going through the debt enforcement process (50 per cent) was largely because they were unable to arrange maintenance without the help of the CSA, whilst one-third indicated that it was the CSA who got in touch with them.

Just over two-fifths (43 per cent) of these respondents had also been through the assessment and application stage in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) and thus were fairly new clients of the CSA, whereas a further one-third (34 per cent) had either been through the change of circumstances or complaints processes during the same time period.

In comparing the profile of debt enforcement respondents to caseload levels as a whole, a higher proportion of PWCs relative to NRPs were surveyed in respect of the debt enforcement element of CSA service. This may be explained by suggesting that more PWCs are likely to be involved at the debt enforcement stage than NRPs as it is their means of pursuing the maintenance amount they are owed. On the other hand, NRPs who are subject to debt enforcement are probably more difficult to locate and survey in the first place, leaving more PWCs in a place to comment on the debt enforcement.

Of those who responded to the debt enforcement questions, 67 per cent have cases which are not paying or paying (the latter category includes those who are partially paying), whereas the proportion of these clients on the caseload is 53 per cent. However, the other 33 per cent of cases may have been in one of these categories over the 12 months prior to the survey but at the time of the survey were categorised as no payment expected.

Finally, it was evident that this component of the sample had a higher proportion of clients who reported a generally poor relationship with the other parent than the overall sample (68 per cent and 49 per cent respectively). Likewise, there was a higher proportion of reported infrequent or no contact with the child compared to the overall sample (63 per cent and 46 per cent respectively). These findings suggest that more difficult personal circumstances may result in more complex cases, which have a greater risk of encountering debt enforcement issues.

**Table 6.1 Profile of respondents to debt enforcement questions**

Segment	Client/case type	Percentage of respondents
Case type	Client type	PWC (64%) and NRP (36%)
	Employment status	Benefit intake clients (46%), non-benefit intake clients (30%) and unknown (24%)
	CSA rules	Old rules (55%) and new rules (45%)
Demographics	Ethnicity	White (95%), BME, Asian and other (5%)
	Disability <sup>1</sup>	Yes (13%), no (86%) and refused (1%)
Case status	Payment type	Collection (100%) and maintenance direct (0%)
	Previous maintenance arrangement	Yes (39%) and no (61%)
	Compliance status*	Paying (42%), not paying (25%) and no payment expected (33%)
Relationship	Previous relationship status	Married (49%), living together (27%), other (23%) and refused (1%)
	Current relationship with other parent	Generally good (16%), generally poor (68%), neither (15%) and refused (1%)
	Reported level of contact NRP has with child(ren) <sup>2</sup>	Frequent (36%), infrequent (22%), no contact at all (41%) and refused (1%)

Weighted base 279, unweighted base 364.

Figures in Table may not add to 100% due to rounding.

\* Paying – positive maintenance calculation and full payment received/paid on the case; not paying – positive maintenance calculation and the full payment has not been received/paid on the case; no payment expected – case is either assessed not charging, nil assessed or maintenance direct (see Chapter 1 and the Glossary for further detail).

<sup>1</sup> The disability question asked was: 'Q19 Do you have any long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity that gives you substantial difficulties in any aspect of your day to day life? By long standing, I mean anything that has troubled you over a period of at least 12 months or is likely to affect you over a period of 12 months?'

<sup>2</sup> This is based on both PWC and NRP opinion.

### 6.3 How important was this to clients?

Over 75 per cent of respondents were of the view that all aspects of the debt enforcement process were 'extremely important' (mean score of 4.66 out of 5). The debt enforcement process received the second highest range of 'extremely important' scores from 75 to 84 per cent. Only the complaints process received higher scores of between 90 and 95 per cent. This indicates that getting the debt enforcement process right is one of the most important service elements for CSA clients.

Within this, the most important aspect (based on 'extremely important' responses) was ensuring that the calculation of arrears was correct; and the aspect accorded least importance (in relative terms) was ensuring that arrears were paid on time.

Therefore, the process of ensuring that debt enforcement is dealt with accurately and appropriately is slightly more important than the timing of the process (Table 6.2).

Further analysis of the responses by sub-groups highlighted that there were largely consistent views on the importance of each aspect of the debt enforcement process amongst both benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients, and amongst both new and old rules clients.

There were, however, notable differences between PWCs and NRPs. PWCs gave a higher importance rating to both taking action to reduce the build up of arrears, and to ensuring that payments of arrears were on time relative to NRPs. This is in line with the fact that it is in the interest of PWCs to resolve any issues in relation to arrears quickly, with a view to providing for their child.

Table 6.2 Views on levels of importance attached to debt enforcement

How important or unimportant was it that...	Not important at all %	Not very important %	No strong opinion %	Quite important %	Extremely important %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA made sure the calculation of arrears was correct?	1	3	2	6	84	4	4.76
The CSA arranged a suitable payments schedule or arrears agreement?	2	0	3	11	79	3	4.70
The CSA used the most appropriate action to reduce arrears?	2	1	3	14	75	4	4.66
The CSA explained the consequences of arrears not being paid?	2	2	4	12	77	3	4.65
The CSA took action to reduce the build up of arrears within a reasonable period of time?	3	2	5	7	80	4	4.65
The CSA made sure payments of arrears were on time?	3	2	6	10	75	5	4.61
Average mean score:							4.66

Weighted base: 279 respondents who answered debt enforcement questions, unweighted base: 364.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest importance and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

## 6.4 Clients' views on the performance of the Child Support Agency

Looking across all aspects of debt enforcement, approximately one-third of clients indicated that the CSA performed well, with the exception of making sure calculations were correct where four out of ten clients agreed that the CSA had performed well. The poorest performing aspect was taking action to reduce the build up of arrears. There were large differences between the proportions of respondents who disagreed strongly in relation to the various aspects of debt enforcement. The proportion who stated that taking action to deal with arrears was an area of poor performance was 56 per cent, whereas the proportion who rated the calculation of arrears as poor was 36 per cent.

The overall mean score for the debt enforcement element of CSA service was 2.51 out of 5 (Table 6.3). This service element received the second lowest mean score (only the complaints process received a lower score of 1.88 out of 5).

Further analysis of the responses suggested that there were variations in performance ratings across the sub-groups although some sub-samples were quite small. Further detail on the findings by sub-group is presented in the Appendices. In summary, some key findings are as follows:

- NRPs consistently rated the performance of the CSA more positively than PWCs in five out of the six aspects of the debt enforcement process, the exception being in relation to making sure that the calculation of arrears was correct (34 per cent compared to 43 per cent respectively). In effect, PWCs are more likely to have negative views about this service element because their payment arrangements are not working as anticipated and this is a source of income. For example, in relation to making sure payments/collections were on time, not surprisingly 20 per cent of PWCs agreed that the CSA performed well in this respect, compared to 45 per cent of NRPs;
- clients who were paying rated performance of the debt enforcement stage more positively in all aspects than clients who were not paying or clients with cases where no payment was expected. These could be cases where there was successful resolution through debt enforcement, thereby reinforcing positive perceptions; and
- while sub-group sample sizes are small, analysis suggests that clients who had no contact at all with the other parent were less positive about most aspects of the debt enforcement stage than other clients in this sub-group. Likewise, NRPs who had no contact with their child rated the performance of the CSA less positively across most aspects of this stage. Again this would suggest that more positive personal circumstances make for less complex cases.

Table 6.3 Views on levels of performance in respect of debt enforcement

To what extent do you agree or disagree that...	Disagree strongly %	Disagree slightly %	No strong opinion %	Agree slightly %	Agree strongly %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA made sure the calculation of arrears was correct?	36	9	9	15	25	6	2.82
The CSA explained the consequences of arrears not being paid?	40	9	10	15	21	5	2.66
The CSA arranged a suitable payments schedule or arrears agreement?	44	7	10	12	22	6	2.59
The CSA made sure payments of arrears were on time?	42	8	12	11	19	9	2.52
The CSA used the most appropriate action to reduce arrears?	48	11	12	8	16	5	2.31
The CSA took action to reduce the build up of arrears within a reasonable period of time?	56	8	7	6	17	6	2.16
Average mean score:							2.51

Weighted base: 279 respondents who answered debt enforcement questions, unweighted base: 364.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest agreement with the statement and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Out of the six statements relating to various aspects of the debt enforcement process, there were variations in relation to three of these by those who had only experience of the debt enforcement process in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) (141) and all other respondents (138).<sup>85</sup> While these sub-groups are small, the differences noted below are of between ten and 14 per cent, values which lie outside of the margin of error:

- arranging a suitable payment schedule or arrears agreement (41 per cent debt enforcement only) compared to 27 per cent debt enforcement and other service elements;
- explaining the consequences of arrears not being paid (41 per cent debt enforcement compared with 31 per cent); and
- taking the most appropriate action to reduce arrears (29 per cent debt enforcement only compared to 18 per cent).

Again, those who only experienced one service element (here, only the debt enforcement stage) were more positive than those who had experienced the debt enforcement stage plus one or more other service elements.

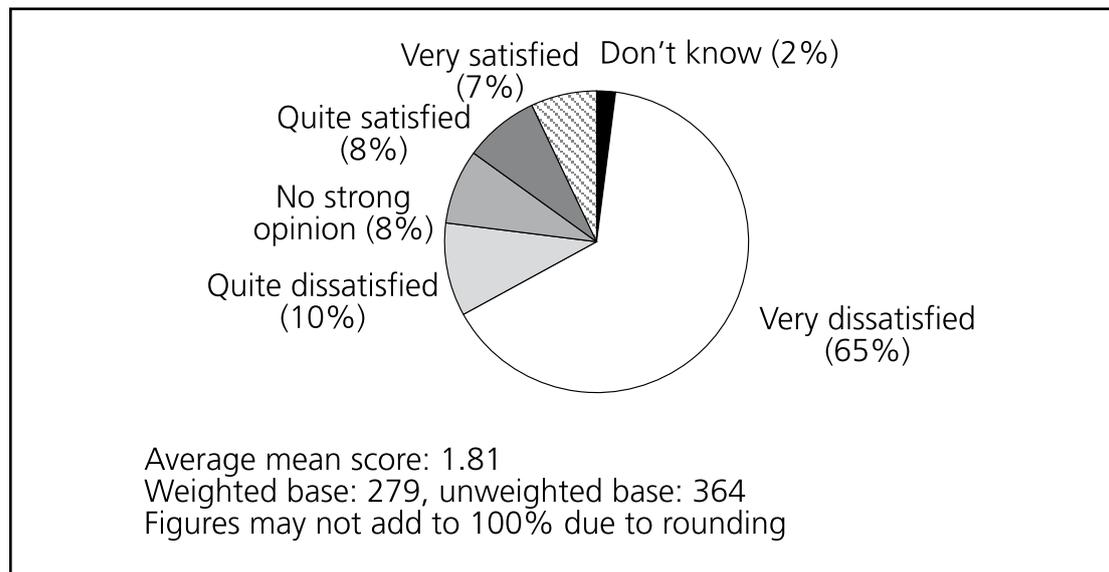
## 6.5 Overall satisfaction

Respondents were asked to comment on their overall satisfaction with this element of service provision, the results of which are set out in Figure 6.2. Only 15 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the debt enforcement process. This is further reflected in a very low average mean score<sup>86</sup> of 1.81 out of 5. That said, it should be acknowledged that respondents to these particular questions in the survey were likely to be negative by virtue of the fact that the arrangement put in place by the CSA has not worked. Only the complaints process received lower satisfaction rating whereby only ten per cent were satisfied with the service.

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<sup>85</sup> A total of 279 respondents for the enforcement questions.

<sup>86</sup> Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest satisfaction and calculating a mean score.

**Figure 6.2 Overall satisfaction with the debt enforcement process**

Further analysis of the variation in satisfaction across sub-groups highlights the following:

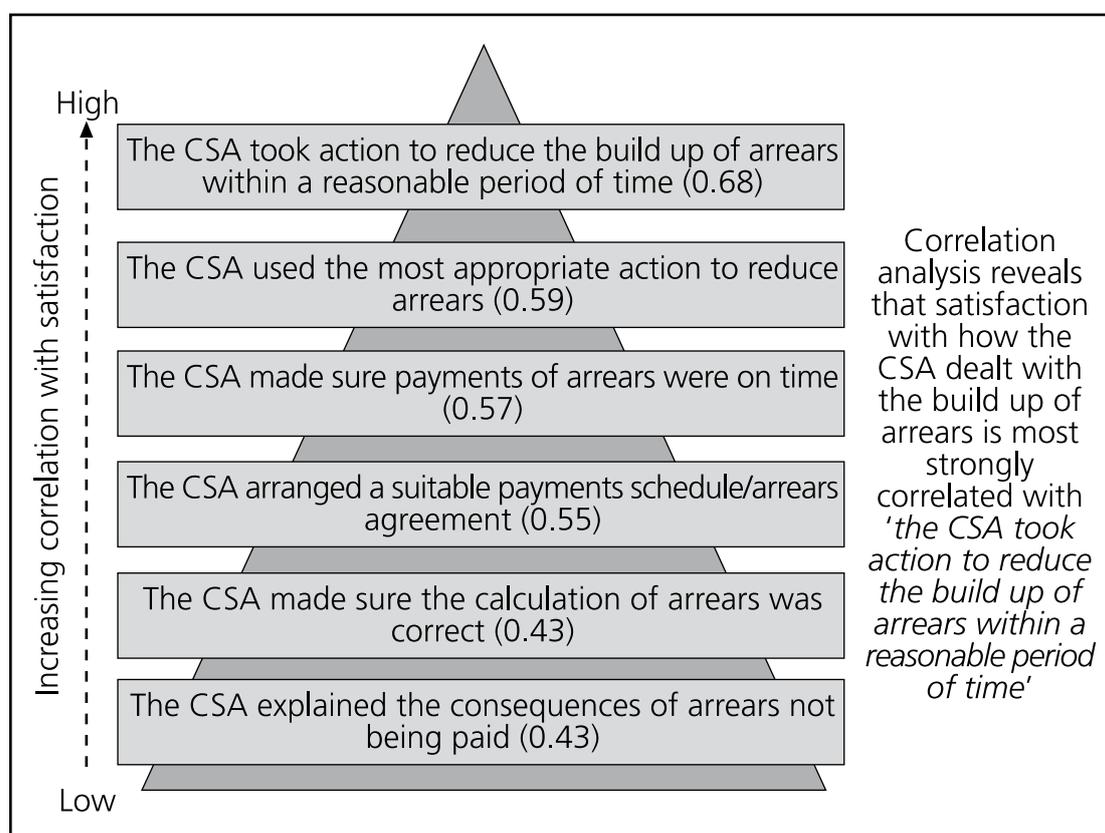
- clients who did not have a maintenance arrangement in place before the CSA got involved were more likely to be dissatisfied compared to those who had a previous arrangement in place (69 per cent compared to 59 per cent respectively). This may be due, in part, to unwillingness to reach a maintenance agreement but we cannot be sure that this is a factor or of its potential influence;
- all clients whose case was currently receiving or making a payment (i.e. compliant) were over two times as satisfied as those clients who were on a case that was still not receiving payment. This suggests that where an effective solution is found the debt enforcement stage is working and has an impact on satisfaction levels;
- NRPs who had no contact with their child reported higher levels of dissatisfaction with the debt enforcement process compared to those who had regular contact with the child (83 per cent and 74 per cent respectively); and
- likewise CSA clients (both PWCs and NRPs) who had no contact with the other parent were less positive compared to those who had a good relationship with the other parent (81 per cent and 68 per cent respectively). Again, this suggests that personal circumstances have a bearing on client experience.

## 6.6 Relationship between performance and satisfaction

The results of the correlation analysis (Figure 6.3) indicate that taking action to reduce the build up of arrears within a reasonable period of time was most strongly correlated with higher levels of satisfaction. Given that this was also the poorest performing aspect of service provision, as well as the second highest in terms of

importance, this may explain why the overall satisfaction score (1.81 out of 5) is lower than the performance score (2.51 out of 5). This also suggests that improving performance around this aspect is critical to improving overall performance and satisfaction ratings. In moving forward, the concept of 'reasonable period of time' is something that can be explored by the Agency in consultation with clients, so that an agreement on what is 'reasonable' is based both on the mechanics of delivering this within the Agency (so that the length of time is not so long that arrears accrue to the extent that they become difficult to recover) and the needs of the client.

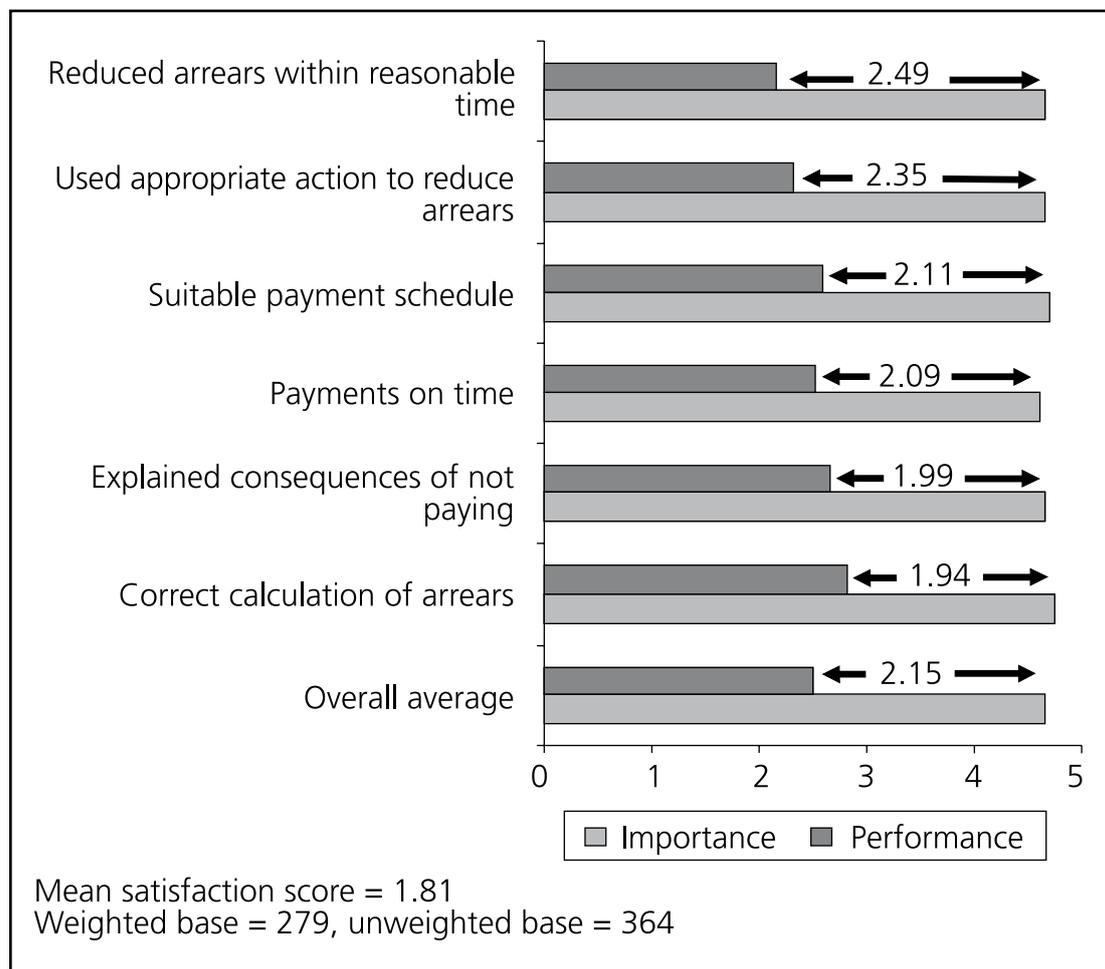
**Figure 6.3 Understanding relationships between debt enforcement process and satisfaction**



## 6.7 Comparison of importance and performance measures

By analysing the performance ratings against the importance ratings (Figure 6.4), there are certain aspects of debt enforcement that could be prioritised in order to improve overall client satisfaction with the process.

**Figure 6.4 Difference between mean performance scores for debt enforcement**



The overall gap between the mean performance and importance ratings is 2.15. Within this, the largest gaps relate to reducing arrears within a reasonable time period and taking appropriate action to reduce arrears. The gap of 2.15 is quite large compared to other CSA service elements (and this is discussed in more detail later) as debt enforcement is a very important area to PWCs (i.e. securing maintenance for their child). Therefore, there are more extreme reactions when this is not met, leading to greater levels of dissatisfaction. These results further substantiate the findings of the correlation analysis above – where it was evident that these two aspects have the strongest relationship with satisfaction, and where poor performance was adversely affecting overall satisfaction levels.

Furthermore, the gaps between mean importance and performance scores, as shown in Figure 3.14, were amongst the largest gaps across all CSA service elements. For example, the gaps for reducing a build-up of arrears within a reasonable time frame, taking appropriate action to reduce arrears, arranging a suitable payment schedule/arrears arrangement, and making sure arrears were on time were all amongst the top ten largest gaps. This suggests there is great potential for scope to improve these aspects of service provision.

## 6.8 Summary

By way of summary, our analysis of the survey results of those accessing the debt enforcement element of the CSA service highlights that:

- nine per cent of the total sample had contact with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey in relation to debt enforcement issues;
- this service element is highly rated in terms of importance (evidenced by the fact that overall 70 per cent of respondents thought that all aspects of this stage were important). Within this there was more emphasis on ensuring that the calculation of arrears was correct than on the timely manner of the process;
- more than two-thirds of clients were of the view that the CSA had not performed well across most aspects of this service element;
- the best performing aspect was ensuring arrears was correct and the poorest performing aspect related to taking action to reduce the build up of arrears within a reasonable period of time;
- only 15 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the debt enforcement element. That said clients experiencing this service element are more likely to be negative by virtue of the fact they are in, or have recently been in, a debt enforcement process. From the correlation analysis it is clear that taking prompt and appropriate action could lead to improved satisfaction levels;
- linked to the above, potential areas for improvement for the CSA in this service element are reducing arrears within a reasonable timescale and using appropriate action to reduce arrears. 'Reasonable timescale' is something that can be defined and managed by the Agency, i.e. keeping a client informed and up-to-date, and clearly explaining how long they can expect for this to take and managing this expectation may improve performance and hence satisfaction;
- analysis of responses against the profile of respondents suggests that in some areas, personal circumstances of the clients may influence performance ratings. In particular it may be difficult for the CSA to meet the needs of those that have difficult relationships or do not see their child and therefore perhaps the CSA could tailor more specific and focused services to meet the particular needs of this group. This is particularly relevant with respect to understanding the risk factors and managing these and also with regard to the way in which more difficult areas are handled; and
- finally in the main, those respondents who have experienced only this service element are more positive about performance than those who have experienced this plus another element or elements of CSA service.

On the whole, these findings show that debt enforcement service provision is a difficult area for the CSA to meet client expectations, especially with greater proportions of clients with poor relationships, no child contact and potentially more complex cases in evidence. Also, it is difficult to establish what the extent

of the impact of these personal circumstances is, alongside the emotional and practical difficulties faced as a result of the relationship breakdown, on client views on performance and satisfaction with regard to debt enforcement. Whichever the driver for this is, this chapter indicates that there was strong dissatisfaction expressed across the board by all client groups, particularly with respect to taking action to reduce the build up of arrears. Addressing the build up of arrears necessitates time and consequently this may merit a dual approach, not only addressing service improvement but also, in working with clients experiencing the debt enforcement process (both NRPs and PWCs), to better manage expectations in the context of the processes and timeframes<sup>87</sup>.

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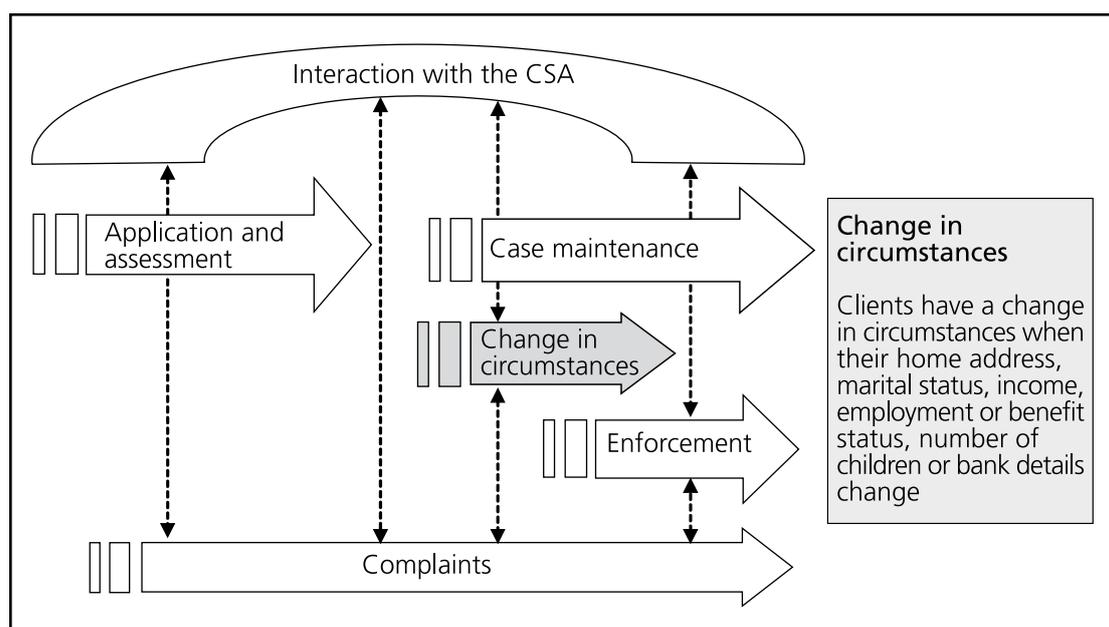
<sup>87</sup> The second year of the OIP (2007-2008) focuses specifically on compliance, collections and enforcement and seeks to address some of the issues raised by clients in this chapter.

# 7 Change in circumstances

## 7.1 Introduction

A change in circumstances occurs when either parent alters their home address, marital status, income, employment (whether moving from benefit to employment, from employment to benefit or from employment or benefit to self-employment), number of children in the household or bank details (Figure 7.1). In some cases this change in circumstance will mean a simple editing of account details, however, in other circumstances, such as when there has been a change of employment or income, or a change in the shared care arrangements, this may also trigger a re-assessment as well.

**Figure 7.1** Position of the change in circumstances stage within the elements of CSA service



This chapter presents the key survey findings in relation to change of circumstances and is structured under the following headings:

- profile of respondents;
- how important was this to clients?;
- clients' views on the performance of the CSA;
- overall satisfaction;
- relationship between performance and satisfaction;
- areas for improvement; and
- summary.

## 7.2 Profile of respondents

There were 418 respondents<sup>88</sup> who had been in contact with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) in relation to a change in circumstances.<sup>89</sup> This represents 20 per cent of those who had contact with the Agency during this period. Substantially more NRPs (64 per cent) than PWCs (36 per cent) experienced this service element, which could possibly be explained by the fact that it is only NRPs' circumstances that are considered in the calculation of child maintenance. Of these respondents, 50 per cent had contact with the CSA in relation to this service element only in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), and a further 38 per cent had contact in relation to their change in circumstance issues as well as their application/assessment, case maintenance and/or complaint issue.

Comparing the profile of respondents in this section of the survey with that of the overall sample outlined in Section 3, it was evident this sample was comprised of a higher proportion of NRPs, non-benefit intake clients, and new rules clients. Respondents in this section also had generally poorer relationships with the other parent<sup>90</sup>, and while there was no difference<sup>90</sup> between the samples in the level of NRP frequent contact with the child, there was a higher proportion of NRPs who

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<sup>88</sup> This equates to 337 respondents in the weighted version of the achieved sample.

<sup>89</sup> These individuals were identified by responding positively to the question "Have you contacted or been contacted by the CSA about a change in your circumstances such as a change of address, bank details, income level, employment or benefit status, living arrangements or the number of children you have living with you?"

<sup>90</sup> This is a feature of the sample who had been in contact only in the twelve months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), i.e. a greater proportion of those in contact regarding any stage of the journey had poorer relationships with the other parent.

had no contact at all. These factors may have an impact on the ratings which respondents assign to the importance, performance and overall satisfaction with this service element.<sup>91</sup>

**Table 7.1 Profile of respondents to change in circumstances questions**

Segment	Client/case type	Percentage of respondents
Case type	Client type	PWC (36%) and NRP (64%)
	Intake type	Benefit intake clients (51%), non-benefit intake clients (27%) and unknown (22%)
	CSA rules	Old rules (42%) and new rules (58%)
Demographics	Ethnicity	White (96%), BME, Asian and other (3%) and refused (1%)
	Disability <sup>1</sup>	Yes (15%), no (85%) and refused (0%)
Case status	Payment type	Collection (87%) and maintenance direct (13%)
	Previous maintenance arrangement	Yes (43%), no (57%)
	Compliance status*	Paying (48%), not paying (17%) and no payment expected (35%)
Relationship status	Previous relationship status	Married (54%), living together (21%), other (24%) and refused (1%)
	Relationship with partner	Generally good (23%), generally poor (57%), neither (18%) and refused (2%)
	Reported level of contact NRP has with child(ren) <sup>2</sup>	Frequent (50%), infrequent (14%), no contact at all (35%) and refused (1%)

Respondents who answered changes in circumstances questions: weighted base 337, unweighted base 418.

Figures in table may not add to 100% due to rounding.

\* Paying – positive maintenance calculation and full payment received/paid on the case; not paying – positive maintenance calculation and the full payment has not been received/paid on the case; no payment expected – case is either assessed not charging, nil assessed or maintenance direct (see Chapter 1 and the Glossary for further detail).

<sup>1</sup> The disability question asked was: 'Q19 Do you have any long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity that gives you substantial difficulties in any aspect of your day to day life? By long standing, I mean anything that has troubled you over a period of at least 12 months or is likely to affect you over a period of 12 months?'

<sup>2</sup> This is based on both PWC and NRP opinion.

<sup>91</sup> There was also a higher proportion of clients who were paying or where no payment was expected and a corresponding lower proportion of non-paying clients. This is probably to be expected given that 'other' cases are those which are 'assessed not charging', 'nil assessed', 'new clients' or 'maintenance direct' and as a result would have more limited contact with the CSA.

### 7.3 How important was this to clients?

The majority of respondents agreed that all areas of service relating to changes in circumstances were important, with over two-thirds rating each element of the changes in circumstances process as extremely important (Table 7.2, mean score of 4.51 out of 5). In relative terms the change of circumstances element of CSA service delivery was allocated one of the lower mean importance scores, only case maintenance scored lower (4.39 out of 5).

Within this, the most important aspect for clients (based on 'extremely important' responses) was that changes in circumstances were implemented accurately by the CSA, and the least important was keeping clients informed of how the implementation of changes in circumstances was progressing. However, it is important to note that while this was the least important area of service for clients in relative terms, 68 per cent stated that this was extremely important.

Further analysis of the responses shows that some sub-groups placed relatively more or less importance on each area of service. For example, PWCs rated dealing with changes in circumstances within a reasonable period of time higher in importance than NRPs (87 per cent compared to 78 per cent respectively). This could be expected given that the PWC may wish for the changes to be dealt with within a minimum period so there would be limited disruption to the payments they receive for their child.

**Table 7.2 Views on levels of importance attached to change in circumstances processes**

How important or unimportant was it that...	Not important at all %	Not very important %	No strong opinion %	Quite important %	Extremely important %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA implemented the changes in your circumstances accurately?	3	3	2	12	77	2	4.61
The CSA explained to you what would happen to your maintenance arrangement as a result of your changes in circumstances?	5	3	4	10	73	5	4.53
The CSA dealt with your changes in circumstances within a reasonable period of time?	3	1	8	12	70	6	4.52
The CSA ensured minimum disruption to your maintenance payments whilst dealing with your changes in circumstances?	5	1	4	11	69	9	4.52
The CSA kept you informed of how the implementation of your changes in circumstances was progressing?	5	5	5	14	68	4	4.40
Average mean score:							4.51

Weighted base: 337 respondents who answered changes in circumstances questions, unweighted base: 418.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\* Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest importance and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

## 7.4 Clients' views on the performance of the CSA

Respondent views on performance across most aspects of the changes in circumstances process were fairly evenly split between those who rated it positively and those who rated it negatively, with a mean score of 2.91 for this service element (Table 7.3).

The best performing aspect related to the CSA implementing changes accurately, with 43 per cent of respondents rating the performance positively. By contrast, the lowest performing areas related to keeping clients informed (47 per cent rating performance negatively) and dealing with changes within a reasonable time period (46 per cent rating performance negatively).

Further analysis of the responses showed that there were variations in performance across the sub-groups. All of these differences have been detailed in Appendix D, and to summarise:

- PWCs consistently rated the performance of the CSA more positively than NRPs across all service areas. It is not clear from the research whether this is driven by the intake type of the nature of the change;
- those clients who were paying at the time of the survey rated the performance of the CSA significantly more positively than those non-paying clients which reflects findings across all service elements and alludes to the suggestion that non-paying clients have a more difficult and negative experience with the CSA; and
- both clients who reported having a good relationship with the other parent and clients who had regular contact with their child rated the performance of the CSA higher than the others in their sub-group, which supports the previously made suggestion that more positive personal circumstances influence experience of the CSA in some way.

**Table 7.3 Views on levels of performance in respect of change in circumstances processes**

To what extent do you agree or disagree that...	Disagree strongly %	Disagree slightly %	No strong opinion %	Agree slightly %	Agree strongly %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA ensured minimum disruption to your maintenance payments whilst dealing with your changes in circumstances?	31	6	11	13	29	11	3.02
The CSA implemented the changes in your circumstances accurately?	37	7	8	13	30	6	2.94
The CSA explained to you what would happen to your maintenance arrangement as a result of your changes in circumstances?	32	9	11	12	26	10	2.89
The CSA kept you informed of how the implementation of your changes in circumstances was progressing?	40	7	11	11	26	6	2.74
The CSA dealt with your changes in circumstances within a reasonable period of time?	41	5	9	14	25	7	2.74
Average mean score:							2.91

Weighted base: 337 respondents who answered changes in circumstances questions, unweighted base: 418.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\* Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest agreement with the statement and calculating a mean score. Figures may not add to 100%.

The results show that those who had experienced changes in circumstances only in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) (169) were more positive about three out of the five aspects of changes in circumstances than those who had experienced this plus other service elements, during that period (168).<sup>92</sup> The difference in opinion ranged from nine per cent to 15 per cent. In particular, the proportion who agreed that the CSA had performed well in respect of:

- ensuring minimum disruption to maintenance payments whilst dealing with changes in circumstances (49 per cent compared to 34 per cent);
- keeping clients informed about how the implementation of their changes in circumstances were progressing (42 per cent compared to 30 per cent); and
- dealing with changes in circumstances within a reasonable time period (43 per cent compared to 34 per cent).

This again shows, that for some of the aspects of service provision under changes in circumstances (three specific aspects), those who had only experienced this element were more positive than those who had experienced this plus other service elements. This is reflective of findings regarding experience of single or multiple aspects of CSA service explored earlier in this chapter.

## 7.5 Overall satisfaction

Respondents were asked to comment on the overall satisfaction with the performance of the CSA in relation to the change in circumstances element of CSA service. The greater proportion of clients were very dissatisfied (43 per cent) with the CSA's change in circumstances process, whilst 32 per cent were satisfied, as shown in Figure 7.2. The mean score<sup>93</sup> for satisfaction with the change in circumstances process was 2.57 out of 5.

In line with previous analysis of variations in sub-groups, similar patterns emerge:

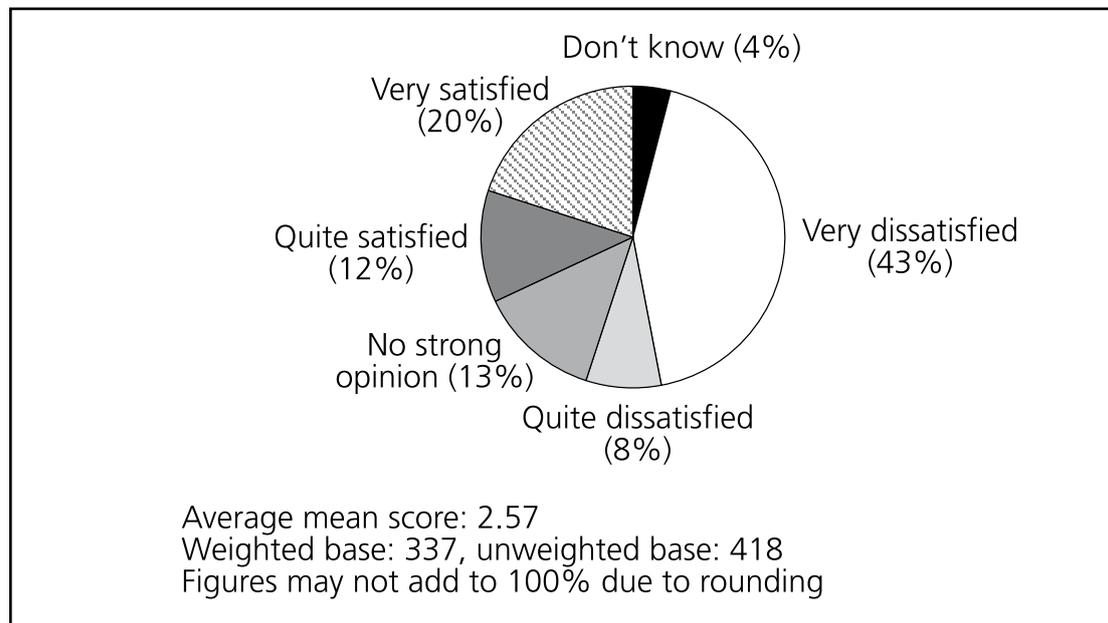
- those who had irregular contact with their child were more dissatisfied with the process than clients with regular contact (62 per cent and 45 per cent respectively);
- clients with a generally poor relationship with the other parent were more dissatisfied than those who had a good relationship (63 per cent compared to 40 per cent);
- more NRPs relative to PWCs were dissatisfied with the change in circumstances stage (56 per cent compared to 41 per cent respectively); and
- those clients who were not paying at the time of the survey were significantly more dissatisfied (62 per cent) than those who were paying (43 per cent).

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<sup>92</sup> A total of 337 respondents for the change of circumstances questions.

<sup>93</sup> Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest satisfaction and calculating a mean score.

**Figure 7.2 Overall satisfaction with the changes in circumstances process**



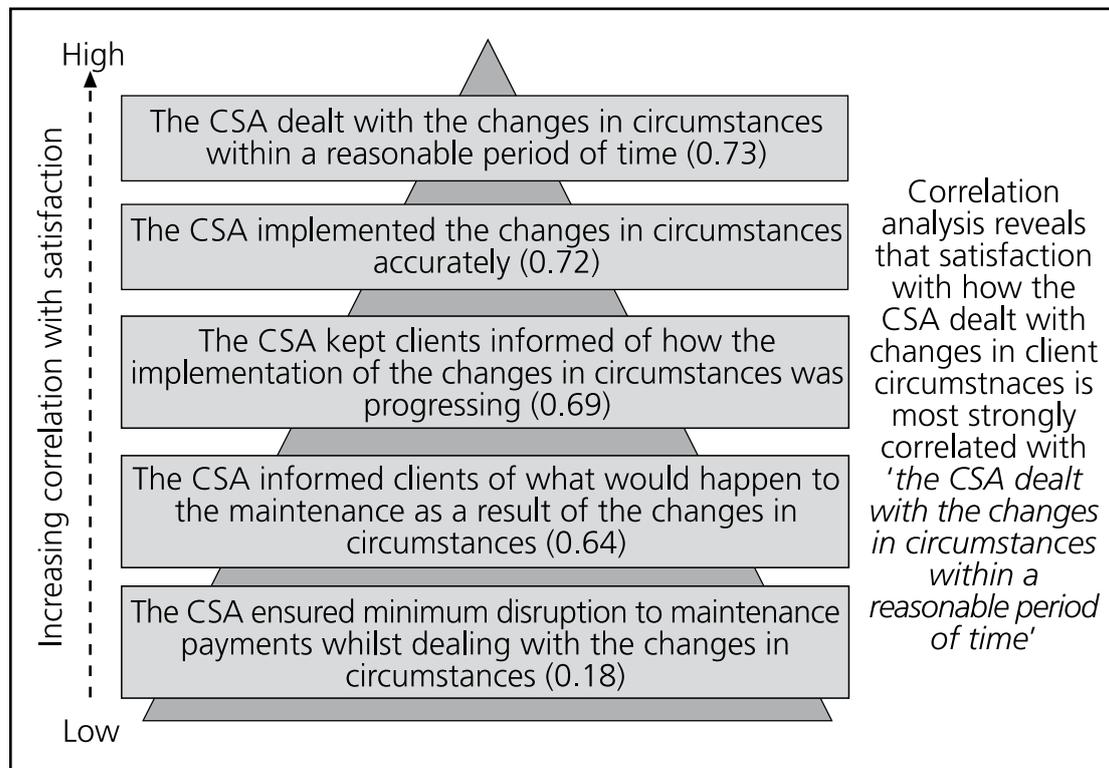
This further reinforces the suggestion that there are particular client groups (NRPs, poor relationship with the other parent, no contact with the child and non-paying clients) who report more negative experiences than their counterparts. This may mean that there is scope for further reflection on the experiences of these groups with a view to understanding their perspective and as a result consideration of potentially addressing particular areas of difficulty for them.

## 7.6 Relationship between performance and satisfaction

Exploring the relationship between the performance ratings and overall satisfaction, (Figure 7.3) shows that dealing with the changes in circumstances within a reasonable period of time has the strongest relationship with overall satisfaction levels, closely followed by implementing the changes in circumstances accurately.

Given that dealing with the changes within a reasonable period of time was also one of the poorest performing areas of service provision (mean score of 2.74) and 70 per cent of respondents rated it as extremely important, this goes some way to explain why the overall satisfaction score (2.57) is lower than the performance score (2.91), and also indicates that improving performance in this area would be likely to increase overall satisfaction.

**Figure 7.3 Understanding relationships between change of circumstances and satisfaction**



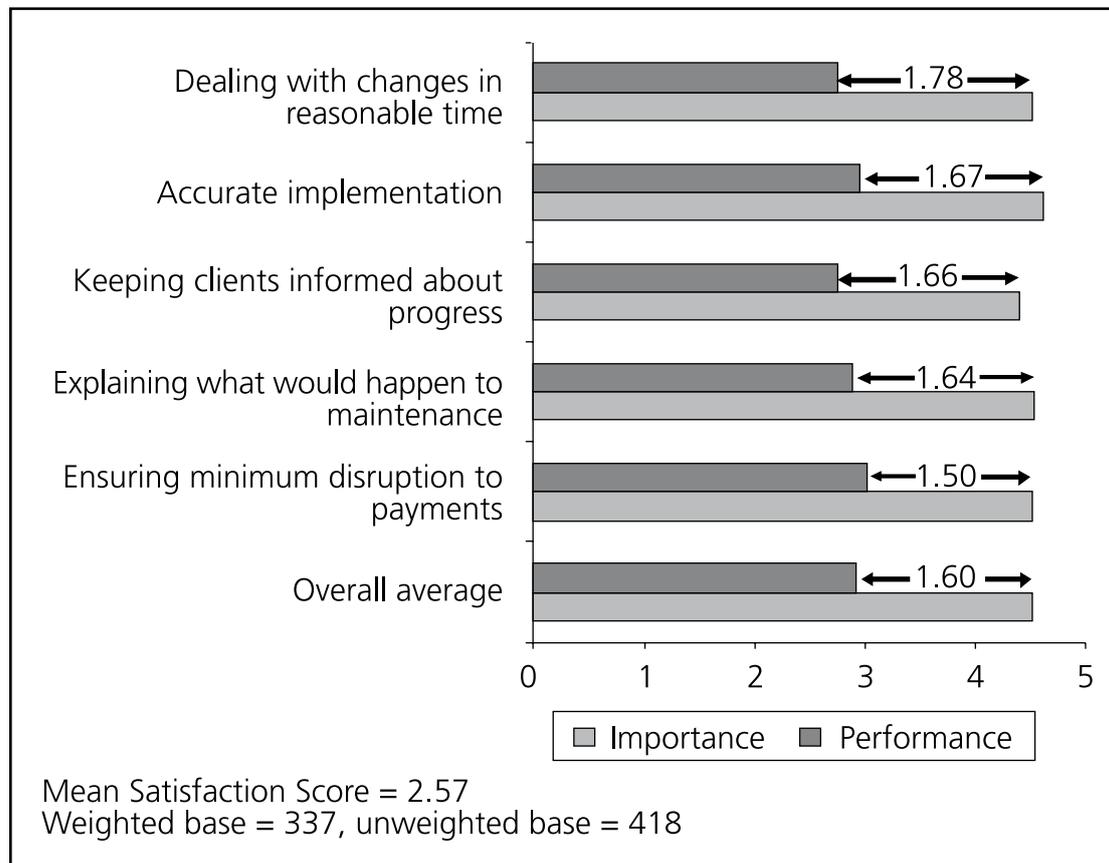
## 7.7 Comparison of importance and performance measures

By analysing the performance ratings against the importance ratings (Figure 7.4) there are certain aspects of the change in circumstance process that could be prioritised to improve overall client satisfaction. This can be achieved by highlighting the aspects of this service element where the 'gap' between importance and performance is largest.

The overall gap between the mean performance and importance ratings is 1.60 (the same gap as for the application and assessment stage) which suggests that there is an opportunity for CSA to improve this element of CSA service. The largest gaps related to dealing with the changes within a reasonable period of time, accurate implementation of the changes and keeping clients informed of progress.

These results further substantiate the findings of the correlation analysis above – where it was evident that these three aspects had the strongest relationships with overall satisfaction and where poor performance in these was adversely affecting overall satisfaction levels.

**Figure 7.4 Difference between mean performance scores for change in circumstances**



## 7.8 Summary

Analysis of the survey results regarding changes in circumstances highlighted that:

- ten per cent of the total sample had contact with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey in relation to change of circumstances;
- clients rated this service element very highly in terms of importance, with over two-thirds rating each element of the changes in circumstances process as extremely important. Within this, the most important aspect was that changes in circumstances were implemented accurately by the CSA;
- views on performance across most elements of the changes in circumstances process were quite evenly split between those who rated it positively and those who rated it negatively. The best performance related to the CSA ensuring minimum disruption to maintenance payments whilst dealing with the changes, with the lowest performing aspects relating to keeping clients informed and dealing with changes within a reasonable time period;

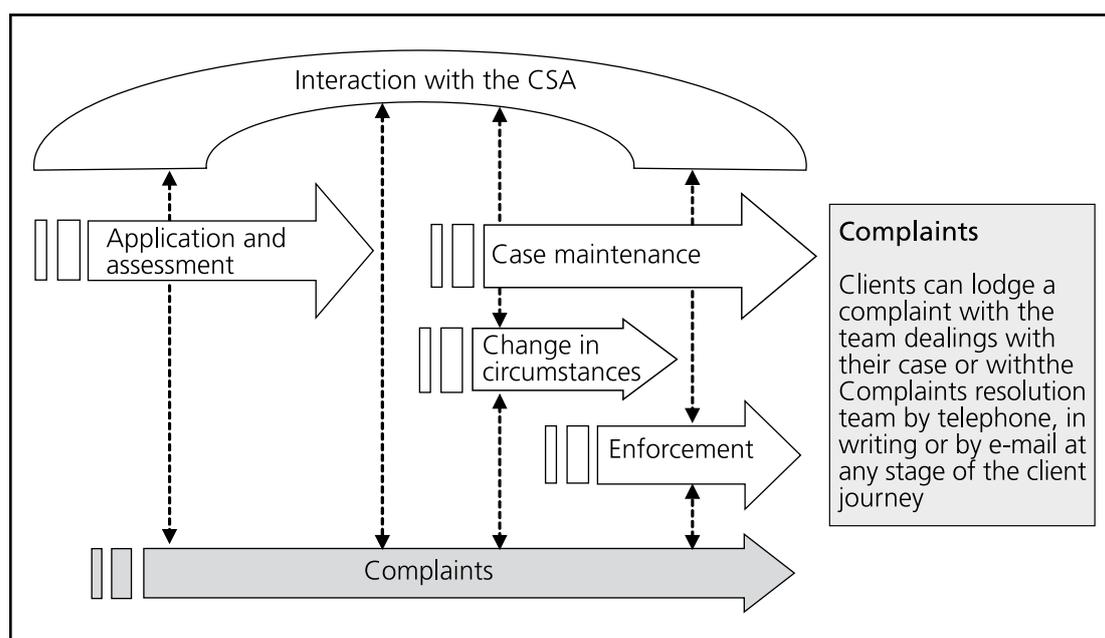
- less than one-third of respondents were satisfied with the CSA's change in circumstances process, and correlation analysis of performance levels against overall satisfaction illustrates that dealing with the changes within a reasonable period of time (closely followed by implementing the changes accurately) is key to improving satisfaction levels. As with debt enforcement, 'reasonable' timescale is something that can be explored by the Agency in consultation with clients, so that an agreement on what is 'reasonable' is based both on the mechanics of delivering this within the Agency and the needs of the client;
- further to the above, potential areas for improvement for the CSA in this service element are:
  - dealing with changes within a reasonable period of time; and
  - implementing the changes accurately;
- similar to previous elements of CSA service, an analysis of responses against the profile of respondents suggests that in some areas, the personal circumstances of the client, have a bearing on client experience. For example, the relationship between the NRP and PWC, and the frequency of contact between the NRP and child all appeared to influence the rating of the CSA performance and overall satisfaction in relation to the change in circumstances element of service – those with better relationships and more frequent contact appear to have a more positive experience; and
- finally, in the main those respondents who have accessed only this element of CSA service are more positive about performance than those who have accessed this plus another service element or elements.

# 8 Complaints

## 8.1 Introduction

A client may make a formal complaint at any stage as indicated in Figure 8.1. In order to be recognised as a formal complaint, a complaint must have been made by telephone, by letter or by email either to the team dealing with the case or directly to the Complaints Resolution Team. The Child Support Agency (CSA) aims to acknowledge complaints within two working days of their submission, and thereafter to let clients know within 15 working days, the resolution or current progress and an intended way forward.

**Figure 8.1 Position of the complaints stage within the elements of CSA service**



This chapter presents the key survey findings in relation to those clients who have experienced the formal complaints procedure, and is structured under the following headings:

- profile of respondents;
- how important was this to clients?;
- clients' views on the performance of the CSA;
- overall satisfaction;
- relationship between performance and satisfaction;
- areas for improvement; and
- summary.

## 8.2 Profile of respondents

The survey captured 272<sup>94</sup> respondents who have experienced the formal complaints procedure in the 'last 12 months'.<sup>95</sup> This represents only a small proportion (13 per cent) of those who had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007). The split between parents with care (PWCs) and non-resident parents (NRPs) was almost equal and there were more new rules than old rules clients (61 per cent and 39 per cent respectively). Almost one-third (32 per cent) of these respondents had only had contact with the CSA in relation to their complaint in the 12 months, with the balance also experiencing one or more other elements of CSA service (Table 8.1).

When compared to the profile of the overall sample set out in Chapter 3, it is evident that those who had been in contact with the CSA in relation to the complaints process generally had poorer relationships with the other parent compared to the sample as a whole (61 per cent compared to 49 per cent) and a higher incidence of no contact with the child/children at all compared to the sample as a whole (37 per cent compared to 29 per cent). There was also a notable difference between the compliance status of the cases of clients participating in the complaints process, where almost twice as many cases were non-paying clients compared to the sample as a whole. Reflecting on the above it is evident that similar to the debt enforcement stage, more difficult personal circumstances are a comparatively more prominent feature of the profile of this group of respondents.

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<sup>94</sup> Which equates to 213 respondents in the weighted version of the achieved sample. Complaints data may be subject to selection bias linked to the quota sampling approach as individuals self identified.

<sup>95</sup> These individuals were identified by positively responding to the question, *'Have you contacted or been contacted by the CSA in the last year about a formal complaint you made to the CSA?'*

**Table 8.1 Profile of respondents to complaints questions**

Segment	Client/case type	Percentage of respondents
Case type	Type of parent	PWC (51%) and NRP (49%)
	Intake type	Benefit intake clients (49%), non-benefit intake clients (29%) and unknown (22%)
	CSA rules	Old rules (39%) and new rules (61%)
Demographics	Ethnicity	White (92%), BME, Asian and other (4%) and refused (4%)
	Disability <sup>1</sup>	Yes (12%), no (86%) and refused (2%)
Case status	Payment type	Collection (83%) and maintenance direct (17%)
	Previous maintenance arrangement	Yes (48%), no (52%)
	Compliance status*	Paying (45%), not paying (20%) and no payment expected (35%)
Relationship status	Previous relationship status	Married (53%), living together (26%), other (18%) and refused (2%)
	Current relationship with other parent	Generally good (19%), generally poor (61%), neither (17%) and refused (3%)
	Reported level of contact NRP has with child(ren) <sup>2</sup>	Frequent (50%), infrequent (11%), no contact at all (37%) and refused (2%)

Weighted base 213, unweighted base 272.

Figures in table may not add to 100% due to rounding.

\* Paying – positive maintenance calculation and full payment received/paid on the case; not paying – positive maintenance calculation and the full payment has not been received/paid on the case; no payment expected – case is either assessed not charging, nil assessed or maintenance direct (see Chapter 1 and the Glossary for further detail).

<sup>1</sup> The disability question asked was: 'Q19 Do you have any long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity that gives you substantial difficulties in any aspect of your day to day life? By long standing, I mean anything that has troubled you over a period of at least 12 months or is likely to affect you over a period of 12 months?'

<sup>2</sup> This is based on both PWC and NRP opinion.

### 8.3 How important was this to clients?

Over 90 per cent of the respondents indicated that all aspects of the complaints process were extremely important (Table 8.2), resulting in a mean score of 4.87 out of 5. This was the highest mean importance score in comparison with the respective scores for all aspects of the CSA service. Within this service element, there were the highest proportion of respondents agreeing that aspects of this service were 'extremely important', i.e. between 90 and 95 per cent of respondents. The range of responses is low and it is not possible to draw robust conclusions on the relative importance of each service element.

**Table 8.2 Views on levels of importance attached to complaints processes**

How important or unimportant was it that...	Not important at all %	Not very important %	No strong opinion %	Quite important %	Extremely important %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA resolved your complaint?	1	0	1	3	94	2	4.92
The CSA understood the nature of your complaint?	1	0	1	3	95	1	4.91
The CSA dealt with your complaint within a reasonable period of time?	2	0	1	3	91	2	4.85
The CSA kept you informed of action taken to resolve your complaint?	2	0	3	4	90	2	4.81
Average mean score:							4.87

Weighted base: 213 respondents who answered complaints questions, unweighted base: 272.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest importance and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Further detailed analysis of the responses made by the various sub-groups in the sample did not reveal any significant differences with respect to views on the importance of each aspect of the complaints process.

## 8.4 Clients' views on the performance of the CSA

Throughout this chapter, there have been some comparisons of importance, performance and satisfaction scores across various elements of CSA service and, therefore, it is now not surprising that respondents' views on the complaints process were most negative. In fact the complaints process received the highest mean importance score, the lowest mean performance score and the lowest mean satisfaction score.

Considering all four aspects of this service element, less than three in every ten clients were of the view that the CSA performed well. This culminated in a low overall mean performance score of 1.88 (Table 8.3).

While sub-groups are small, further analysis of the responses indicates that there were variations in opinion. The detailed analysis is presented in Appendix D (Table D.32), but by way of summary:

- PWCs consistently rated the performance of the CSA more positively in relation to complaints than NRPs in all aspects of service. The largest difference of opinion was in relation to understanding the nature of the complaint where 36 per cent of PWCs rated the performance of the CSA positively compared to 18 per cent of NRPs;
- benefit intake clients rated the performance of the CSA significantly higher than non-benefit intake clients in two out of the four aspects of complaint handling – that is being kept informed of action taken to resolve the complaint (20 per cent of benefit intake clients compared to nine per cent of non-benefit intake clients) and resolving the complaint (23 per cent of benefit intake clients compared to eight per cent of non-benefit intake clients); and
- clients who reported having no NRP contact with the child rated the performance of the CSA in dealing with complaints lower than those with regular contact (seven per cent and 11 per cent respectively).

**Table 8.3 Views on levels of performance in respect of complaints processes**

To what extent do you agree or disagree that...	Disagree strongly %	Disagree slightly %	No strong opinion %	Agree slightly %	Agree strongly %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA understood the nature of your complaint?	51	11	8	10	17	3	2.29
The CSA kept you informed of action taken to resolve your complaint?	62	13	5	5	10	4	1.84
The CSA dealt with your complaint within a reasonable period of time?	73	7	3	4	10	3	1.68
The CSA resolved your complaint?	72	5	3	5	9	6	1.66
Average mean score:							1.88

Weighted base: 213 respondents who answered complaints questions, unweighted base: 272.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest agreement with the statement and calculating a mean score.

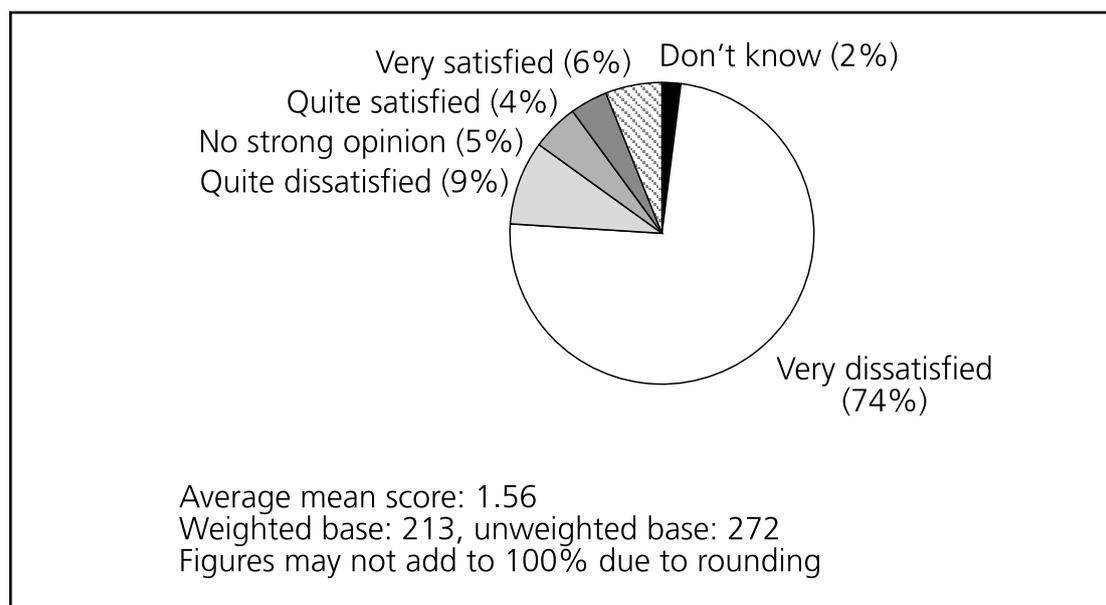
Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Of the four complaints aspects of service provision, those who had experienced this service element only and others who had experienced this, plus other elements, were in the main agreeing to the same extent on the performance of the CSA. However, there were some differences of opinion with regards to the CSA's understanding of the nature of the complaint. Again, those who only accessed the complaints stage in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) were generally more positive than others who accessed this plus other stages (36 per cent compared to 23 per cent respectively who agreed that the CSA performed well in this respect). However, it should be noted that in this instance, the sample sizes were quite low, with 69 respondents having engaged with the CSA in relation to complaints only in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) and 144 in relation to complaints plus some other service element(s).<sup>96</sup>

## 8.5 Overall satisfaction

Respondents were asked to comment on the overall satisfaction with this service element, the results of which are set out in Figure 8.2. As would be expected, given the performance ratings set out above, there are very high levels of dissatisfaction evident. In summary only one out of every ten clients were satisfied with the complaints process, culminating in the lowest mean overall satisfaction score<sup>97</sup> (across all stages) of 1.56.

**Figure 8.2 Overall satisfaction with the complaints process**



<sup>96</sup> A total of 213 respondents answered the questions on the complaints element of service.

<sup>97</sup> Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest satisfaction and calculating a mean score.

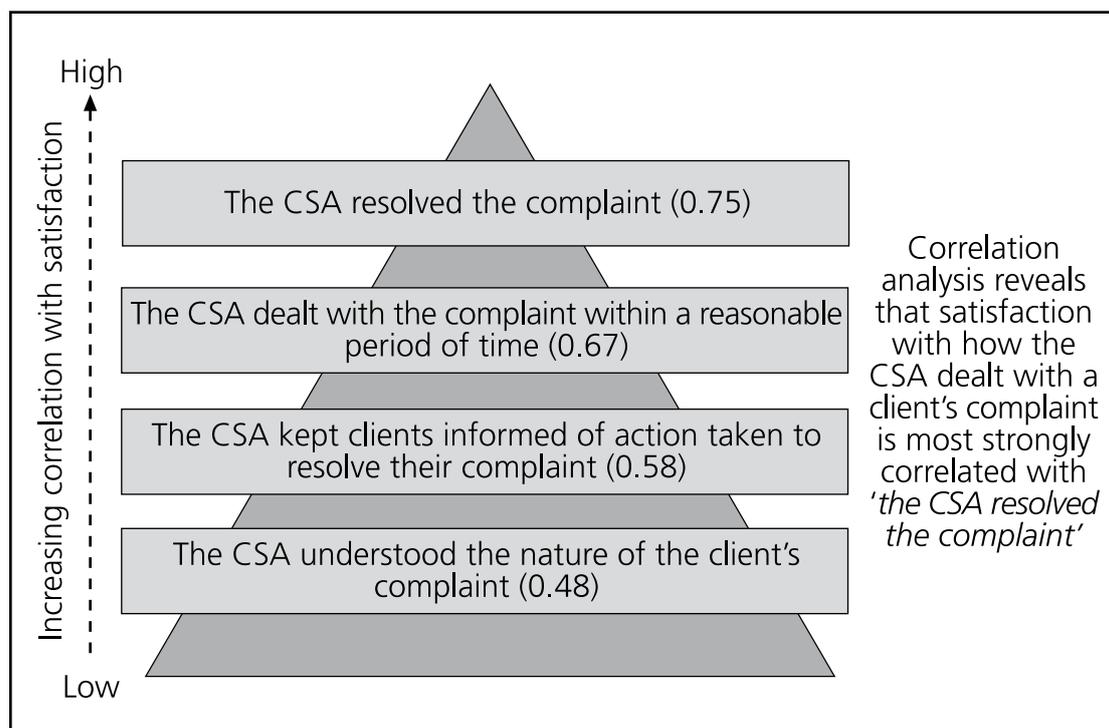
As with other elements of CSA service, NRPs and old rules clients are more dissatisfied than their comparator groups.

## 8.6 Relationship between performance and satisfaction

Again, as with other aspects of service, the satisfaction score (1.56) was lower than the performance score (1.88). Exploring the relationship between the performance ratings and overall satisfaction through correlation analysis (Figure 8.3) indicates as would be expected, that actually resolving the complaint was most strongly correlated with higher levels of satisfaction, followed by dealing with the complaint within a reasonable period of time. These aspects are of most importance to clients and performance in these areas is comparatively poorer, which somewhat explains the comparatively poorer satisfaction ratings when compared to performance.

Resolution of the complaint to the client's satisfaction may not always be possible. However, the timeliness of dealing with the complaint and keeping clients informed of progress also had a strong relationship with satisfaction and this gives some optimism that satisfaction in this area can be improved with a focus on improving processes rather than outcomes. Therefore, the CSA should seek to maximise quality of service in other complaints aspects to build satisfaction overall.

**Figure 8.3 Understanding relationships between complaints processes and satisfaction**

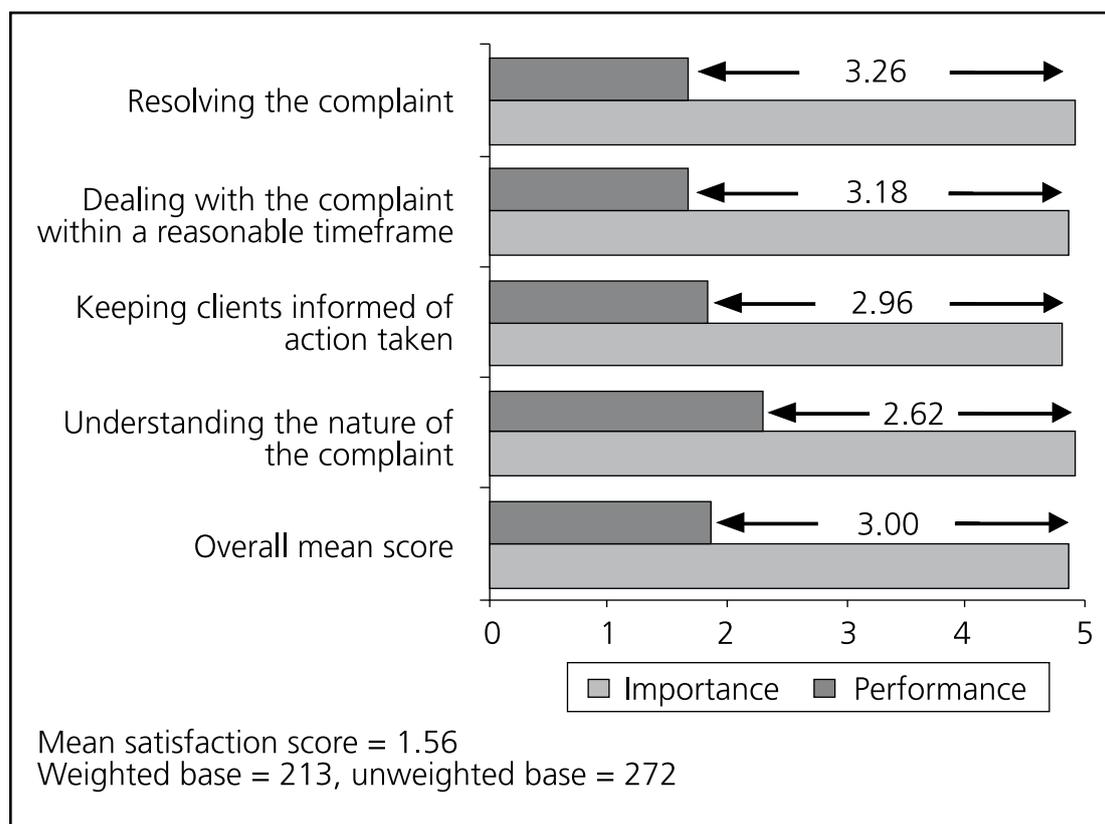


## 8.7 Comparison of importance and performance measures

Figure 8.4 highlights aspects of the complaints process where there is a large gap between the importance assigned by clients and the performance ratings achieved.

Overall there is a difference of 3.00 in the mean scores for importance and performance for the complaints processes which is the largest gap across all CSA service elements. In particular, the largest gap is in relation to resolving complaints and dealing with complaints within a reasonable timeframe. The gaps for the four statements presented in Figure 8.4 are the four largest gaps between importance and performance across all aspects of the CSA service elements. Therefore, all aspects of the complaints process could be priority areas for improvement by the CSA in the future. However, when considering the prioritisation of actions across all aspects of CSA service it should be borne in mind that the greater proportion of clients in contact with the Agency will benefit from improvements in more mainstream service provision areas such as application and assessment, case maintenance, etc., as this is the subject of the majority of client contact with the CSA.

**Figure 8.4 Difference between mean performance scores for complaints**



## 8.8 Summary

The analysis of the survey results, with respect to the complaints process, highlights that:

- less than one in every ten clients surveyed had contacted or been contacted by the CSA within the 12 months prior to the survey as part of the complaints process;
- over 90 per cent of the respondents indicated that all aspects of the complaints process were extremely important; and
- considering all four aspects of the complaints process, eight in every ten clients were of the view that the CSA had not performed well in this area.

On the whole, these findings suggest that a small proportion of the sample had made a formal complaint. However, of those, the vast majority rated performance as poor and client expectations were not being met. This is clearly a difficult area of experience for clients, particularly in view of the comparatively heightened importance levels and associated high expectations. The analysis gives clear signposts to areas for improvement (resolution and timeliness) however, with more complex cases, achieving these targets may not be feasible and therefore, other factors such as keeping clients informed should also be improved in order to raise satisfaction levels.

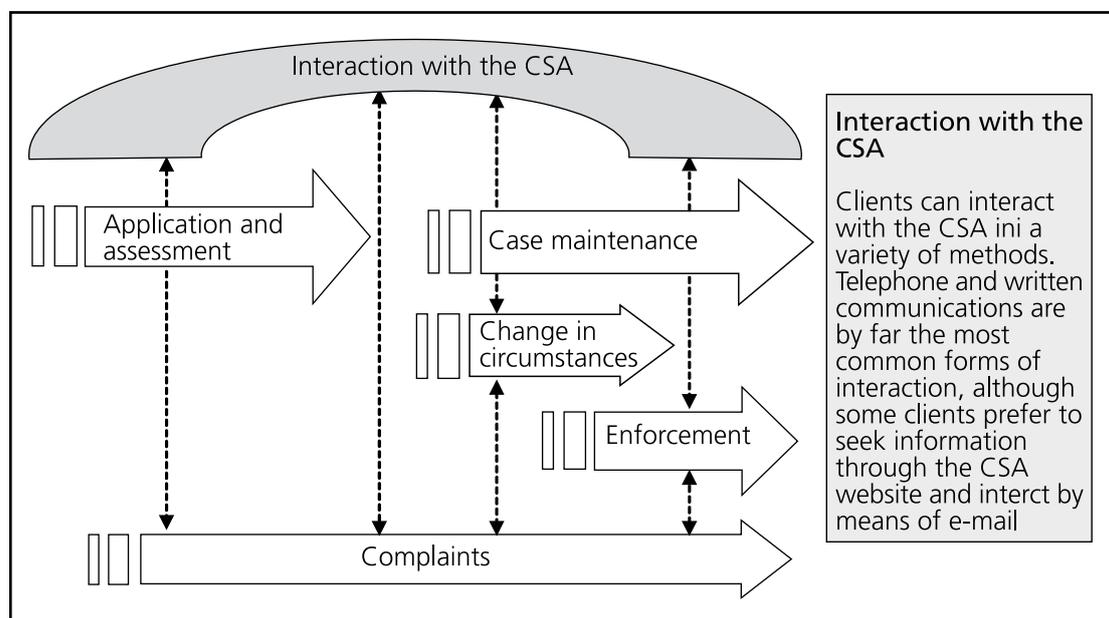
# 9 Interaction with the Child Support Agency

## 9.1 Introduction

This chapter examines clients' views on their overall interaction with the Child Support Agency (CSA) and is structured under the following headings:

- profile of respondents;
- relationships with CSA front-line employees;
- communication between the CSA and its clients;
- the capacity of CSA employees; and
- summary.

**Figure 9.1 Position of interaction with the CSA within the elements of CSA service**



## 9.2 Profile of respondents

The survey identified 2,009 individuals who had been contacted by or contacted the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007). This figure includes all respondents with the exception of those who stated that they had no contact with the Agency during that period, or couldn't remember if they had. The profile of respondents that have had a specific interaction with the CSA (Table 9.1) reflects the overall profile of those who had generally been in contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (Table 3.4) and as such there were greater proportions of clients with poor relationships with the other parent and with no contact with the child.

**Table 9.1 Profile of respondents to interactions questions**

Segment	Client/case type	Percentage of respondents
Case type	Type of parent	PWC (48%) and NRP (52%)
	Intake type	Benefit intake clients (51%), non-benefit intake clients (26%) and unknown (23%)
	CSA rules	Old rules (42%) and new rules (58%)
Demographics	Ethnicity	White (92%), BME, Asian and other (6%) and refused (2%)
	Disability <sup>1</sup>	Yes (14%), no (85%) and refused (1%)
Case status	Payment type	Collection (84%) and maintenance direct (16%)
	Previous maintenance arrangement	Yes (43%), no (57%)
	Compliance status*	Full (16%), partial (26%), and other (58%)
Relationship status	Previous relationship status	Married (49%), living together (26%), other (24%) and refused (2%)
	Current relationship with other parent	Generally good (25%), generally poor (55%), neither (17%) and refused (3%)
	Reported level of contact NRP has with child(ren) <sup>2</sup>	Frequent (55%), infrequent (13%), no contact at all (30%) and refused (2%)

Weighted base 1,691, unweighted base 2,009.

Figures in table may not add to 100% due to rounding.

\* Paying – positive maintenance calculation and full payment received/paid on the case; not paying – positive maintenance calculation and the full payment has not been received/paid on the case; no payment expected – case is either assessed not charging, nil assessed or maintenance direct (see Chapter 1 and the Glossary for further detail).

<sup>1</sup> The disability question asked was: 'Q19 Do you have any long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity that gives you substantial difficulties in any aspect of your day to day life? By long standing, I mean anything that has troubled you over a period of at least 12 months or is likely to affect you over a period of 12 months?'

<sup>2</sup> This is based on both PWC and NRP opinion.

## 9.3 Relationships with CSA front-line employees

### 9.3.1 How important was this to clients?

In line with survey findings from other elements of CSA service, clients attributed high importance to the relationship factors, with respondents indicating that CSA employees being open and honest was the most important aspect (based on 'extremely important' responses) in relationships. The least important aspect related to CSA employees providing clients with written information where they had asked for it (Table 9.2).

**Table 9.2 Views on levels of importance attached to relationships**

How important or unimportant was it that...	Not important at all %	Not very important %	No strong opinion %	Quite important %	Extremely important %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
CSA staff were open and honest?	1	1	3	7	88	0	4.81
CSA staff treated you with courtesy and respect?	1	0	3	10	86	0	4.80
CSA staff dealt with any issues or queries you raised about your case within a reasonable period of time?	1	1	5	10	82	1	4.73
CSA staff contacted you by 'phone when they said they would	2	1	3	9	79	7	4.72
CSA staff provided you with written information where you had asked for it?	1	1	5	8	75	10	4.71
CSA staff were sensitive to your needs?	2	1	6	10	81	1	4.68
Average mean score							4.74

Weighted base: 1,090 respondents who answered interaction questions, unweighted base: 1,342.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest importance and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

These findings suggest that the intangible aspects of service provision surrounding client-CSA employee relationships are as important as elements of actual delivery.

### **9.3.2 Views on the performance of the CSA**

The CSA performed well in relation to treating clients with courtesy and respect, being open and honest and being sensitive to client needs – more than half of clients interviewed agreed the CSA had delivered on these issues. Good performance was particularly noticeable with regard to treating clients with courtesy and respect where 67 per cent agreed compared to 23 per cent who disagreed (Table 9.3). The CSA performed worst in relation to contacting clients by telephone when they said they would.

This suggests that CSA employees are performing well across various aspects of its service, specifically with regard to client handling skills. However, in contrast, the findings also suggest that clients have particular issues with the CSA following through on commitments made to contact clients when they said they would.

**Table 9.3 Views on levels of performance in respect of relationships**

To what extent do you agree or disagree that...	Disagree strongly %	Disagree slightly %	No strong opinion %	Agree slightly %	Agree strongly %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
CSA staff treated you with courtesy and respect?	16	7	9	23	44	0	3.73
CSA staff were open and honest?	22	10	12	19	37	0	3.38
CSA staff were sensitive to your needs?	27	9	11	18	33	1	3.20
CSA staff provided you with written information where you had asked for it?	30	7	9	15	26	12	2.99
CSA staff contacted you by 'phone when they said they would	37	8	9	14	24	8	2.77
CSA staff dealt with any issues or queries you raised about your case within a reasonable period of time?	38	11	10	16	23	2	2.74
Average mean score:							3.17

Weighted base: 1,090 respondents who answered interaction questions, unweighted base: 1,342.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest agreement with the statement and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

### 9.3.3 Comparison of importance and performance measures

By analysing the performance ratings against the importance ratings (Figure 9.2), there are certain areas relating to relationships which could be prioritised to improve overall satisfaction. Overall, there is an average difference of 1.58 in the mean scores for importance and performance in the area of relationships between clients and CSA staff. This compares with average differences of 1.38 for communication and 1.76 for expertise. This suggests that while there is scope to close the gap between client expectations of a relationship with the CSA and CSA performance in this area, the CSA faces a bigger challenge in meeting the expectations of clients in relation to their knowledge and experience in managing child maintenance arrangements. The largest differences related to the CSA dealing with queries within a reasonable period of time (1.99) and the CSA contacting clients by telephone when they said they would (1.95).

The CSA performs well on client handling with regard to treating clients with courtesy and respect, being open and honest, and being sensitive to their needs. Further improvement on client handling could be made by improving the timeframe of responses to client queries, and following through on commitments made to contact clients at a pre-agreed time, would increase overall client satisfaction with their relationship with the CSA.

**Figure 9.2 Difference between mean importance and performance scores for relationships**



### 9.3.4 Sub-group analysis

Detailed analysis of the responses made by the various sub-groups in the sample indicates (in some instances) differences in the performance ratings attributed to relationship issues.

In terms of the profile of respondents, as with previous sections, the pattern of parents with care (PWCs) attaching higher importance and performance ratings than non-resident parents (NRPs) to the tested statements is borne out for the area of relationships across most metrics.

The largest differences were in relation to CSA employees being sensitive to client needs (60 per cent PWC and 40 per cent NRP respectively rating the performance of the CSA positively), and being treated with courtesy and respect (76 per cent PWC and 58 per cent NRP respectively). This indicates that the handling of NRPs could be improved. It should be remembered that the position of NRPs as the source of funds (sometimes in a context where there is a poor relationship or no contact with the child), can create a difficult environment for CSA staff to build good client relationships. It is important that staff are equipped to deal with the NRP context if improvements are to be made in this area.

Analysis of the data suggests that those clients who have engaged with the Agency on one aspect of the service in comparison to those who have had multiple service engagements, rate their relationships more positively. This is illustrated by the highlights of this analysis as follows:

- clients who had experienced the application and assessment element **only** (446) rated the performance of the CSA higher in the area of relationships than those who had experienced application and assessment in addition to other service elements (412);<sup>98</sup>
- those who experienced the case maintenance element **only** (542) in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) rated the performance of the CSA more positively than those who had experienced this in addition to other elements of CSA service (409) in relation to some aspects of the area of relationships;
- a similar pattern emerged when the performance ratings of those who experienced the changes in circumstances element **only** (169) in the last 12 months were compared with those who had experienced this in addition to other CSA service elements (168);
- this pattern of more positive performance ratings from clients who experienced a single service engagement compared to clients with multiple service engagements, is borne out in the ratings for the CSA dealing with queries within a reasonable period of time – 41 per cent compared to 32 per cent respectively for the case maintenance stage and 38 per cent and 29 per cent respectively for the changes in circumstances stage; and

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<sup>98</sup> A total of 858 respondents for the application and assessment questions.

- there was no notable difference between the performance ratings of those clients who had experienced the complaints and debt enforcement service elements only and those who had experienced these in addition to other elements.

## 9.4 Communication between the Child Support Agency and its clients

### 9.4.1 How important was this to clients?

In terms of communication, keeping clients informed of what was happening in their case scored highest in terms of importance (based on 'extremely important' responses), while contacting the client at a time that suited them was least important (Table 9.4). This suggests that what is relatively more important to clients are issues that concern their case specifically, rather than any administrative/procedural matters such as being contacted at a time or in a way that suited them. However, as with other tangible and intangible aspects of service delivery, high levels of importance were noted.

**Table 9.4 Views on levels of importance attached to communication**

How important or unimportant was it that...	Not important at all %	Not very important %	No strong opinion %	Quite important %	Extremely important %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
The CSA kept you informed of what was happening in your case?	2	1	3	8	85	2	4.76
You could contact the CSA in a way that suited you?	1	1	4	13	80	1	4.73
The CSA was easy to contact?	1	1	5	11	80	2	4.71
You could contact the CSA at a time that suited you?	1	1	4	15	77	1	4.69
The CSA contacted you in a way that suited you?	1	1	4	15	75	3	4.68
The CSA contacted you at a time that suited you?	2	2	5	14	73	5	4.61
Average mean score							4.70

Weighted base: 1,090 respondents who answered interaction questions, unweighted base: 1,342.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest importance and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

### **9.4.2 Views on the performance of the CSA**

Broadly speaking, respondents rated communication factors more positively than relationship factors, with the majority of clients agreeing with all communication statements, with the exception of keeping clients informed. Being able to contact the CSA at a time and in a way that suited clients performed particularly well, evidenced by over 60 per cent agreeing with these statements in comparison to approximately 20 per cent who disagreed (Table 9.5). Ease of contact also performed quite well, with 54 per cent of respondents agreeing that the CSA was easy to contact, compared to 33 per cent who disagreed.

Comparatively poor performance with regard to proactively keeping clients up to date on their case, is a recurring theme throughout the analysis presented thus far. The CSA performed best at enabling clients to contact them at a time that suited the client, and keeping clients informed of what was happening in their case scored lowest in performance measures.

**Table 9.5 Views on levels of performance in respect of communication**

To what extent do you agree or disagree that...	Disagree strongly %	Disagree slightly %	No strong opinion %	Agree slightly %	Agree strongly %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
You could contact the CSA at a time that suited you?	14	8	13	23	41	2	3.70
You could contact the CSA in a way that suited you?	18	8	10	22	40	2	3.61
The CSA was easy to contact?	20	11	12	22	32	2	3.37
The CSA contacted you at a time that suited you?	22	8	13	19	32	6	3.33
The CSA contacted you in a way that suited you?	23	9	11	20	33	4	3.32
The CSA kept you informed of what was happening in your case?	41	11	9	15	21	2	2.64
Average mean score:							3.34

Weighted base: 1,090 respondents who answered interaction questions, unweighted base: 1,342.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest agreement with the statement and calculating a mean score.

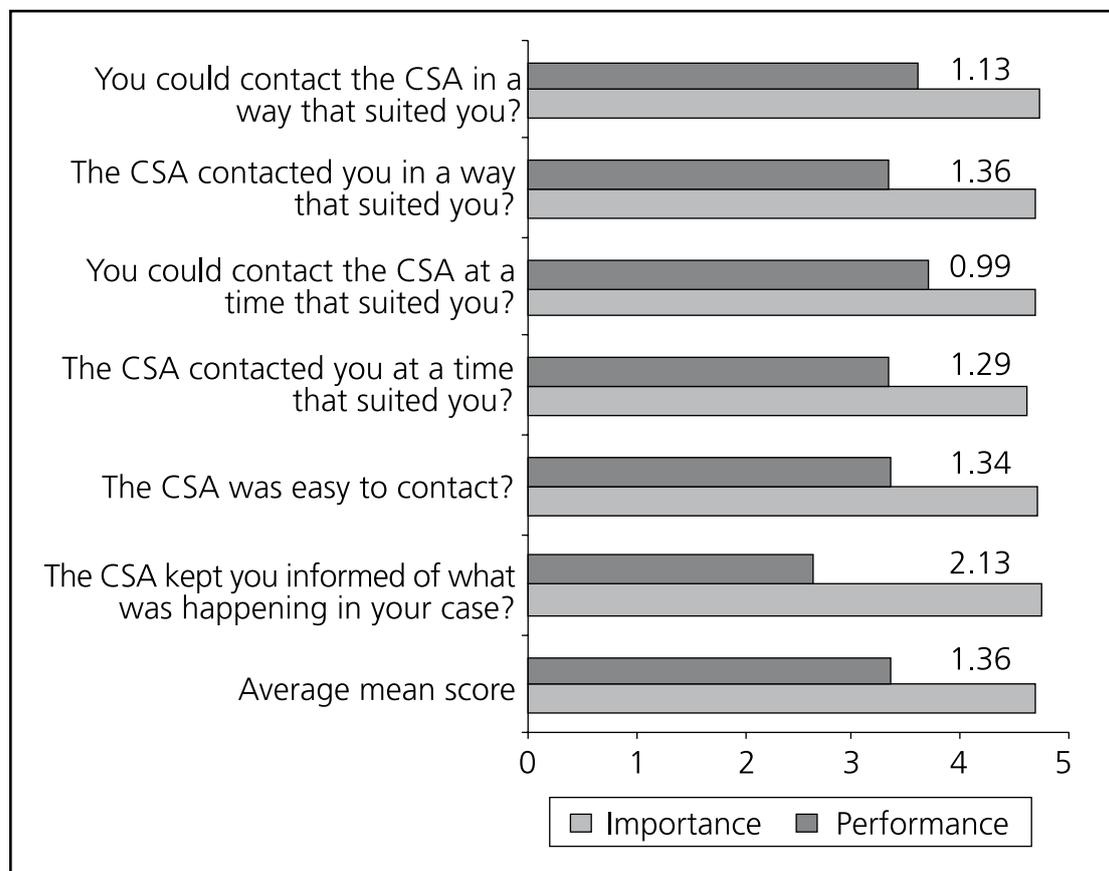
Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

### 9.4.3 Comparison of importance and performance measures

Analysis of the performance ratings against the importance ratings (Figure 9.3) indicates that prioritising specific areas related to communication may well improve overall client satisfaction levels.

There is an average difference of 1.36 in the mean scores for importance and performance issues related to communication, with the largest difference relating to the CSA keeping clients informed of what was happening in their case (2.13).

**Figure 9.3 Difference between mean importance and performance scores for communication**



In terms of the methods used by the CSA to communicate with clients, over two-thirds of those who had interacted with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) had received a letter from the CSA and just less than two-thirds received a telephone call from the CSA. The data suggests that while letters from the CSA are an effective means of communication with the majority of its clients, there is an element among the CSA client base with whom there are communication challenges. For example, while the majority of respondents agreed that the letter they received was clear and easy to understand (64 per cent), nearly one-fifth disagreed with the same statement; and while over

half of respondents reported that the letter contained all the information they needed (52 per cent), nearly a third disagreed<sup>99</sup>.

Only a small proportion (15 per cent) had accessed the CSA website. Respondents indicated that the main reasons for not accessing the CSA website<sup>100</sup> included the following:

- they did not use the internet (16 per cent);
- they did not have access to the internet (21 per cent); and
- they did not know the CSA had a website (16 per cent) or they had no need to access it (19 per cent).

This suggests that while there may be issues with the CSA not promoting the website as a portal of information for clients, there are wider issues around how to communicate with clients who either do not use the internet or do not have access to a computer.<sup>101</sup>

#### **9.4.4 Sub-group analysis**

As with previous sections, analysis of the profile of respondents suggests that PWCs are more positive than NRPs in relation to all aspects of communication between the CSA and its clients. The largest gap related to the CSA being easy to contact (63 per cent and 45 per cent respectively). This suggests that there are challenges for the CSA in making itself more accessible to NRPs.

Those clients who were paying rated the performance of the CSA more positively than those who were not paying, the most notable difference relating to the CSA keeping the client informed of what was happening in their case (40 per cent compared to 30 per cent). This is also reflective of some of the key findings in relation to aspects of service delivery explored previously.

Following the pattern noted with regard to the differences in client groups with single compared to multiple service engagements, there were also more positive opinions regarding communication expressed by the former group in relation to the following:

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<sup>99</sup> The Agency has put in place a programme to improve communication with clients, which includes prioritising telephone contact over written communication, simplifying leaflets and letters and a new system aimed at improving callback arrangements.

<sup>100</sup> 1,025 clients responded to this question.

<sup>101</sup> It should be noted that Agency does not depend on the website as a communication channel through which it communicates with clients (about their case) and it is not considered a primary/standalone channel for engagement.

- communication between the client and CSA was rated more positively in all aspects by those who had experienced the application and assessment element only (446), compared to those who experienced this in addition to other service elements (412).<sup>102</sup> The largest difference related to the CSA keeping clients informed of what was happening in their case (49 per cent and 28 per cent respectively rating positively the performance of the CSA in this aspect) – further reinforcement of this as an area of concern among clients; and
- there were similar differences between the ratings for some aspects of communication from those who had experienced the changes in circumstances element only (169) and those who had experienced this in addition to other CSA service elements (168).<sup>103</sup>

There were broadly similar views on the performance of the CSA in most aspects of communication from those who had experienced the case maintenance element only (542) and those who have experienced this in addition to other service elements (409).<sup>104</sup>

## 9.5 The capacity of Child Support Agency employees

### 9.5.1 How important was this to clients?

High levels of importance were noted (90 per cent to 93 per cent ‘important’ ratings) in terms of the expertise of CSA employees, however overall the range of ‘extremely important’ responses were lower in comparison to relationship and communication factors. Amongst the statements of CSA employee expertise (Table 9.6) the clients indicated that it was most important (based on ‘extremely important’ responses) that CSA staff understood the details of their case. The least important element of CSA employee expertise is indicated by the mean importance score for CSA staff providing information clients needed on how the child maintenance process works.

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<sup>102</sup> A total of 858 respondents for the application and assessment questions.

<sup>103</sup> A total of 337 respondents for the changes in circumstances questions.

<sup>104</sup> A total of 951 respondents for the case maintenance questions.

**Table 9.6 Views on levels of importance attached to expertise**

How important or unimportant was it that...	Not important at all %	Not very important %	No strong opinion %	Quite important %	Extremely important %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
CSA staff understood the details of your case?	1	1	4	9	84	1	4.76
CSA staff were able to deal with any queries or issues you raised about your case?	2	1	3	12	80	2	4.71
CSA staff displayed good knowledge of the CSA child maintenance process?	1	1	5	10	80	2	4.70
CSA staff provided the information you needed on how the child maintenance process works?	2	1	4	12	79	1	4.69
Average mean score							4.71

Weighted base: 1,090 respondents who answered interaction questions, unweighted base: 1,342.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest importance and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

### 9.5.2 Client views on the performance of the CSA

In terms of expertise, clients rated the performance of the CSA most highly in regard to employees displaying a good knowledge of the process (Table 9.7). The worst performance related to CSA employees being able to deal with queries about the client case. A notable feature of these findings is that similar proportions (approximately 40 per cent) agree and disagree with statements regarding CSA staff knowledge of the case maintenance process, providing the information needed and understanding the details of client cases. In the case of displaying good knowledge of the child maintenance process and providing information on that process, more respondents agreed than disagreed. This shows that there is a body of people who are being well serviced with regard to knowledge sharing activities – however, two-thirds of respondents state that the CSA could do more to meet their needs in this area.

This suggests that while the CSA performs well at displaying a good knowledge of how the child maintenance process works in general, there are issues around the CSA being knowledgeable about the details of specific client cases.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> A recent reorganisation of the Agency that took place after the survey aims to support the delivery of the new operating model, with the intention of more caseworkers being available with knowledge on individuals' cases.

**Table 9.7 Views on levels of performance in respect of expertise**

To what extent do you agree or disagree that...	Disagree strongly %	Disagree slightly %	No strong opinion %	Agree slightly %	Agree strongly %	Other* %	Mean importance score **
CSA staff displayed good knowledge of the CSA child maintenance process?	28	12	13	20	25	2	3.03
CSA staff provided the information you needed on how the child maintenance process works?	27	13	14	19	25	2	3.03
CSA staff understood the details of your case?	33	13	9	17	26	1	2.90
CSA staff were able to deal with any queries or issues you raised about your case?	32	15	11	15	23	3	2.83
Average mean score							2.96

Weighted base: 1,090 respondents who answered interaction questions, unweighted base: 1,342.

\*Other = those who answered either 'N/A' or 'Don't know'.

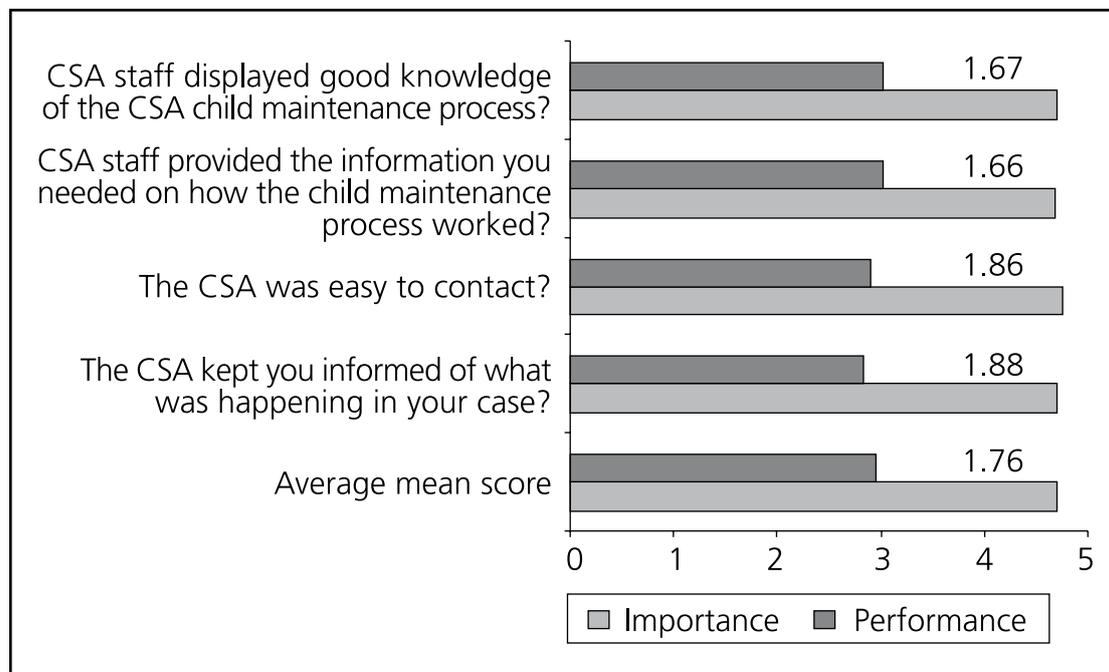
\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1 - 5 from lowest to highest agreement with the statement and calculating a mean score.

Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

### 9.5.3 Comparison of importance and performance measures

There is an overall average difference of 1.76 between the importance and performance ratings for the area of expertise (Figure 9.4). This is larger than for the area of relationships (1.58) and communication (1.36), suggesting that the CSA faces the largest challenge in meeting the expectations of clients in relation to their knowledge and experience in managing child maintenance arrangements. The largest gap related to CSA employees being able to deal with client queries (1.88) followed closely by understanding the details of the case. This analysis suggests that if this area is prioritised, then overall client satisfaction with the knowledge and experience of the CSA may well improve.

**Figure 9.4 Difference between mean importance and performance scores for expertise**



### 9.5.4 Sub-group analysis

Analysis of the profile of respondents highlights that the pattern set out in previous sections also applies here, with PWCs rating the expertise of the CSA more positively than NRPs. The most notable gap related to the CSA being able to deal with client queries about their case (45 per cent of PWCs rating this positively compared to 31 per cent of NRPs).

Analysis of the data was also undertaken to compare the performance ratings of clients who experienced different service elements in the 12 months prior to the survey:

- for all aspects of expertise, there were significant differences between the performance ratings of those who experienced the application and assessment element only (446) and those who experienced this in addition to other service elements (412).<sup>106</sup> The largest related to the CSA providing clients with the information they needed on how the child maintenance process works (57 per cent compared to 36 per cent respectively). Those accessing application and assessment only in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) may be more recent/newer clients and, if this is the case, then this may suggest more recent improvements in the application and assessment process. However, we cannot be certain that this is the case;
- there were smaller differences between the ratings of those who had experienced case maintenance only (542) and this element in addition to other service elements (409).<sup>107</sup> Of note, there was a ten per cent difference in the positive performance ratings in relation to the CSA being able to deal with queries about their case (42 per cent and 32 per cent respectively) and a nine per cent gap in relation to the CSA understanding the details of clients' cases (46 per cent and 37 per cent respectively); and
- there were notable variations in the performance ratings of the aspects of expertise among those who had experienced the change in circumstances element only (169) compared to those who had been through this in addition to other service elements (168).<sup>108</sup> The largest difference related to CSA staff having a good knowledge of the child maintenance process (53 per cent and 33 per cent respectively rating the performance of the CSA positively in this regard).

These results suggest that multiple service engagements adversely affect client views on CSA expertise.

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<sup>106</sup> A total of 858 respondents for the application and assessment questions.

<sup>107</sup> A total of 951 respondents for the case maintenance questions.

<sup>108</sup> A total of 337 respondents for the change of circumstances questions.

## 9.6 Summary

By way of summary, our analysis of the survey results with respect to the interaction process highlights that:

- the interaction process as a whole was rated as highly important, with over 70 per cent rating all aspects of the interaction process (relationships, communication and expertise) as extremely important. Clients placed most importance on the personal skills of CSA staff, that they understand the details of their case, keep them informed of what is happening, and that they are open and honest in their dealings. Relatively less important to clients were protocol-related matters such as being contacted at a time that suited them, CSA staff displaying a good knowledge of the general maintenance process and receiving written information from the CSA (although these were still perceived to be very important);
- overall, the most important aspects of the interaction process were:
  - CSA staff being open and honest (4.81);
  - being treated with courtesy and respect (4.80); and
  - CSA staff keeping respondent informed/understood details of case (4.76);
- within the three areas of interaction, the most important aspects were as follows:
  - in the area of relationships, CSA employees being open and honest was attributed with most importance;
  - in terms of communication, keeping clients informed of what was happening in their case was most important; and
  - in respect of the expertise of the CSA, CSA employees understanding the details of the client's case was rated highest in importance;
- the performance of the CSA in relation to the interaction process as a whole performed better than service delivery aspects, with particular instances of good performance with regard to relationships (treating clients with courtesy and respect, being open and honest, being sensitive to client needs) and communication (being easy to contact). However, there are also areas of challenge, specifically around telephoning clients when they say they will, keeping clients up to date with what is going on in their case, and being able to deal with specific queries about the client's case;
- gap analysis of the importance and performance ratings showed that the potential areas for improvement are as follows:
  - keeping clients informed about what is happening in their case;
  - dealing with queries within a reasonable period of time; and
  - ensuring that the CSA contacted clients at the agreed time;

- findings from an analysis of the responses by sub-groups were as follows:
  - PWCs were more positive than NRPs in relation to most aspects of the interaction process (relationships, communication and expertise). This suggests that improving the client handling skills of CSA employees through training could improve the experience of NRPs when dealing with the CSA, as employees may be equipped to deal more appropriately with the specific needs of NRPs, taking into consideration the context in which they have come into contact with the CSA;<sup>109</sup>
  - following the pattern noted previously in analysis of other aspects of service delivery, those clients who were paying rated the performance of the CSA more positively than those not paying in the area of communication between clients and the CSA; and
  - considering all aspects of the interaction process, the data showed a pattern whereby clients with multiple service engagements have comparatively stronger negative views on CSA performance.

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<sup>109</sup> Since the survey has been undertaken the Agency has begun to use emerging client insight to inform its Education Programme, Client Contact Improvement Project and caseworker training (e.g. telephony skills). It is anticipated that the benefits of these will be more fully realised through the major upgrade to IT systems.

# 10 A summary view of client experience

## 10.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together an overall picture of client experience<sup>110</sup> by considering the following issues:

- what matters most to Child Support Agency (CSA) clients?;
- how do clients feel the CSA has performed?;
- where are the largest gaps between importance and performance?; and
- the client experience – overall and throughout their client journey.

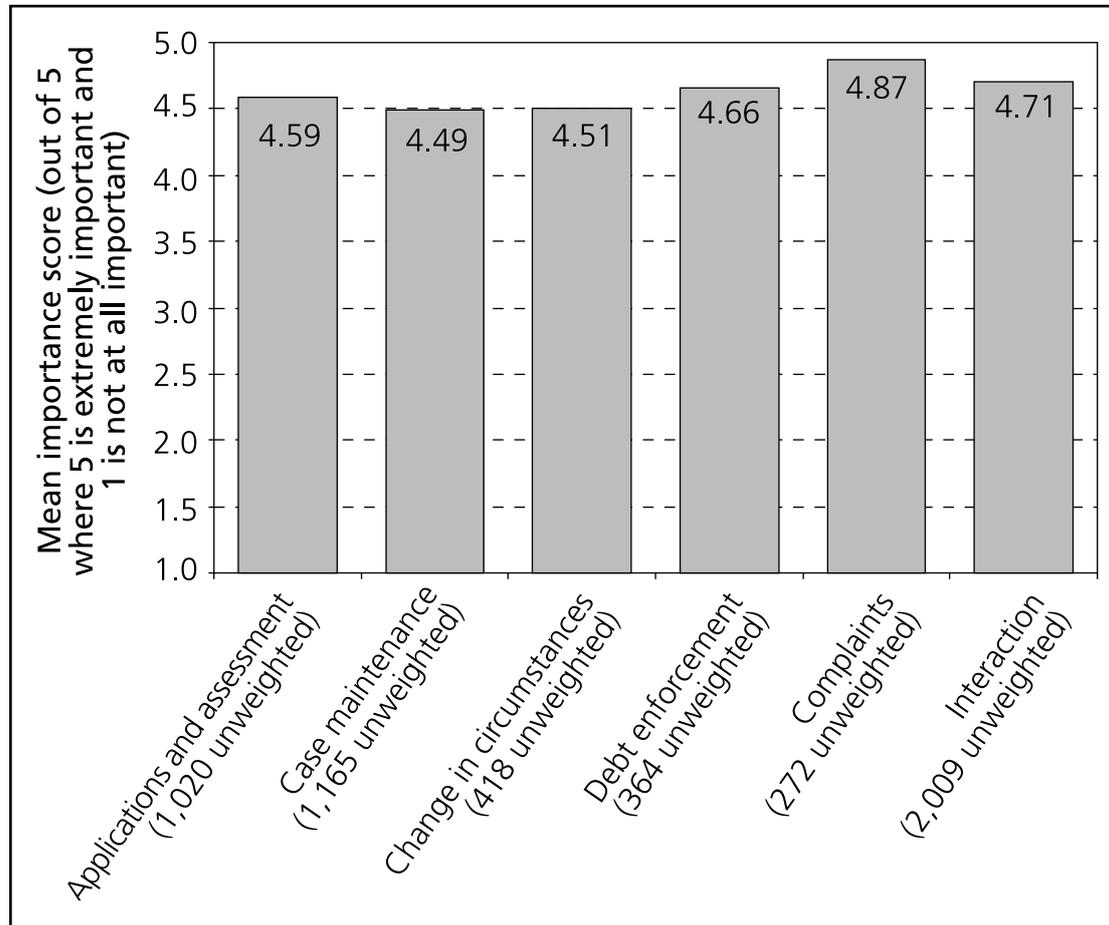
## 10.2 What matters most to Child Support Agency clients?

The mean importance scores were all very high as shown in Figure 10.1. In comparing importance across CSA service areas, the highest importance scores relate to the complaints process. However, it should be noted that all elements of the service provision received very high importance scores.

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<sup>110</sup> This chapter focuses on the overall picture with differences in subgroups being explored in Chapter 11. Further detailed information is available in Appendix D.

**Figure 10.1 Mean importance scores<sup>111</sup> attributed to each element of CSA service**



The most important aspects of service delivery to clients are presented in Table 10.1. The table also sets out, in relative terms, the areas of service provision to which clients attributed the least importance (although the lowest rated aspects of service delivery are still very high scores). All four aspects of the complaints process are within the top five most important areas. There were also strong concentrations of high importance scores across all elements<sup>112</sup> of the interaction statements, with fourteen out of the top 20 importance statements being related to aspects of interaction. For example, treating staff with courtesy and respect (2.8), keeping clients informed of progress (4.76) and understanding the details of the client's case (4.76) were of high importance.

Considering importance results at a sub-group level reinforces the message of high importance attributed to aspects of service across all client groups. However, there are relative differences and these highlight two key messages:

<sup>111</sup> Computed by allocating a value of 1-5 from lowest to highest importance and calculating a mean score.

<sup>112</sup> Expertise, relationships and communications.

- non-resident parents (NRPs) place more importance on issues pertaining to flexibility and understanding (taking account of their circumstances and being sensitive to their needs) while parents with care (PWCs) focus on getting the payments right; and
- non-benefit intake clients have had higher expectations than benefit intake clients.

These and other issues are explored more fully in Chapter 11.

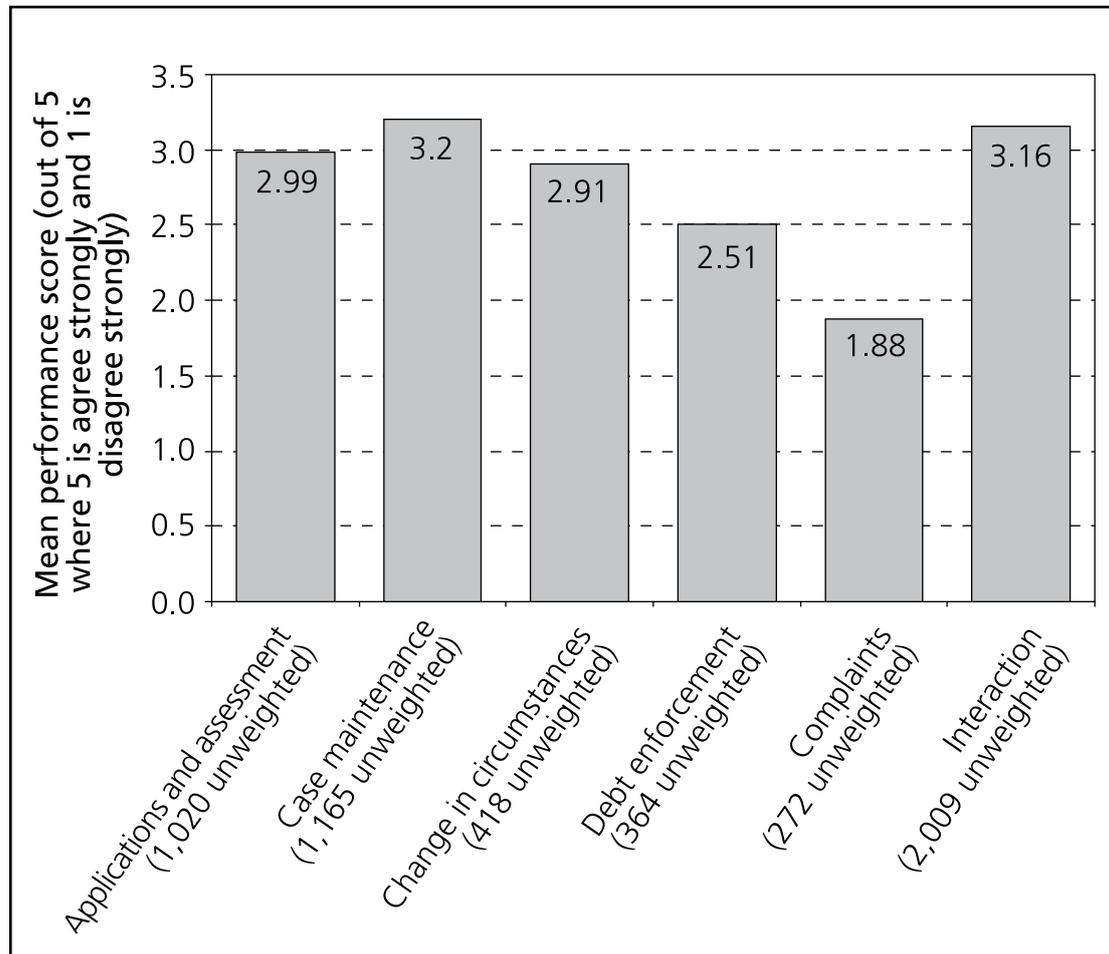
**Table 10.1 Five most and least important areas of service delivery (in relative terms)**

Level of importance	CSA service element	Aspect of service delivery	Mean importance score
Highest	Complaints	The CSA resolved your complaint	4.92
	Complaints	The CSA understood the nature of your complaint	4.91
	Complaints	The CSA dealt with your complaint within a reasonable timescale	4.85
	Interaction/relationships	CSA staff were open and honest	4.81
	Complaints	The CSA kept you informed of action taken to resolve your complaint	4.81
Lowest	Application and assessment	You understood how the CSA calculated the maintenance amount	4.52
	Change of circumstances	The CSA ensured minimum disruption to your maintenance payments whilst dealing with your changes in circumstances?	4.52
	Case maintenance	The CSA made sure payments were/ collection of maintenance was on time?	4.42
	Change of circumstances	The CSA kept you informed of how the implementation of your changes in circumstances was progressing?	4.40
	Case maintenance	The CSA arranged a suitable payment/ collection/ schedule for you?	4.34

### 10.3 How do clients feel the Child Support Agency has performed?

It was the view of those clients surveyed that performance in general was relatively poor with an average mean score of 2.74 across all aspects of CSA service delivery (Figure 10.2). In addition it is noticeable that there is a greater range in the mean performance scores (1.88 to 3.2 out of 5) in comparison with the range of the mean importance scores (4.5 to 4.9 out of 5). This indicates that in contrast to consistently high expectations, views on service provision vary considerably.

**Figure 10.2 Mean performance scores<sup>113</sup> attributed to each element of CSA service**



Analysis shows that CSA performance in those elements of service which clients would tend to encounter earlier in their experience with the CSA (i.e. application and assessment, case maintenance), is considered to be more positive than experiences of the Agency that generally occur after these initial stages (enforcement and complaints). These findings were emphasised both through the findings from the focus groups and the telephone survey. The results comparing views on performance between those who had only accessed one service element and those who had accessed more than one element showed that, in general, those who have only experienced one service element within the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), are more positive. This suggests that those with multiple service engagements are less positive about their CSA experience than those with one service engagement. It is unclear if this stems from the complexity of the case which requires more interaction, a combination of poor service experiences or both.

<sup>113</sup> Computed by allocating a value of 1-5 from the lowest to highest agreement with the statement and calculating a mean score.

Table 10.2 presents, in relative terms, the five best performing areas of service provision and the five lowest performing areas according to the survey of CSA clients. In the main, the best performing elements of service delivery are in relation to the communication process; in particular, methods of communications and treating clients with respect and their information with care. Aspects of the case maintenance process also received comparatively higher performance scores. In comparison the areas receiving the lowest mean performance scores, in relative terms, are related to the complaints processes. For example, understanding the nature of the complaint and addressing the complaint within a reasonable timeframe.

**Table 10.2 Five best and poorest performance areas of service delivery (in relative terms)**

Level of importance	CSA service element	Aspect of service delivery	Mean importance score**
Best	Interaction/relationships	CSA staff treated you with courtesy and respect	3.73
	Interaction/communications	You could contact the CSA at a time that suited you	3.70
	Interaction/communications	You could contact the CSA in a way that suited you	3.61
	Application and assessment	The CSA treated information provided with care	3.54
	Case maintenance	The CSA made sure payments were/ collection of maintenance was on time	3.45
Poorest	Complaints	The CSA understood the nature of your complaint	2.29
	Debt enforcement	The CSA took action to reduce the build up of arrears within a reasonable period of time	2.16
	Complaints	The CSA kept you informed of action taken to resolve your complaint	1.84
	Complaints	The CSA dealt with your complaint within a reasonable period of time	1.68
	Complaints	The CSA resolved your complaint	1.66

\*\*Computed by allocating a value of 1-5 from the lowest to highest satisfaction and calculating a mean score

## 10.4 Where are the largest gaps between importance and performance?

The results are explored further by examining the gaps between importance and performance across all CSA service elements. The results set out in Figure 10.3 show that the gap is larger in the complaints and debt enforcement part of CSA service provision. However, it should be noted again that this client insight research did not track one cohort group through all CSA service elements, but

rather collated their views in response to touch-points within the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) only.

**Figure 10.3 Gaps between mean importance and performance scores**

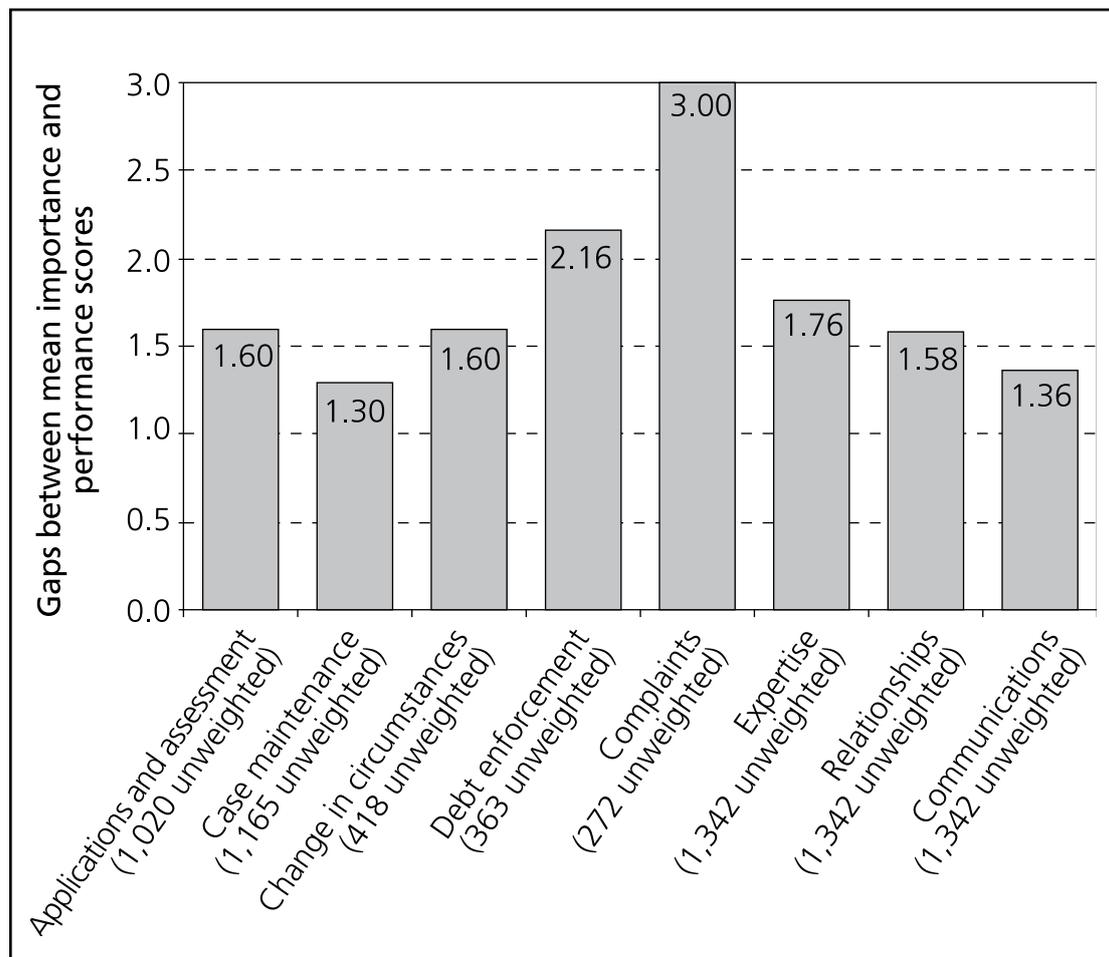


Table 10.3 examines further the individual aspects of each element of service provision where the gaps are largest and these relate to resolving the complaint, dealing with the complaint within a reasonable timescale and being kept informed of progress in resolving the complaint.

The aspects of service provision where the gaps are smallest and hence, the CSA is being relatively more successful in meeting client expectations, is in relation to contacting clients at a time that suits and making sure maintenance/payments are on time.

**Table 10.3 Five largest and smallest gaps<sup>114</sup> between importance and performance scores**

Size of gap	CSA service element	Aspect of service delivery	Difference between the mean importance and performance scores
Larger	Complaints	The CSA resolved your complaint	3.26
	Complaints	The CSA dealt with your complaint within a reasonable period of time	3.17
	Complaints	The CSA kept you informed of action taken to resolve your complaint	2.97
	Complaints	The CSA understood the nature of your complaint	2.62
	Debt enforcement	The CSA took action to reduce the build up of arrears within a reasonable period of time	2.49
Smaller	Application and assessment	The CSA treated information provided with care	1.10
	Case maintenance	The CSA arranged a suitable payment/ collection/ schedule for you	1.10
	Interaction/ relationships	CSA staff treated you with courtesy and respect	1.07
	Interaction/ communications	You could contact the CSA at a time that suited you	0.99
	Case maintenance	The CSA made sure payments were/ collection of maintenance was on time	0.97

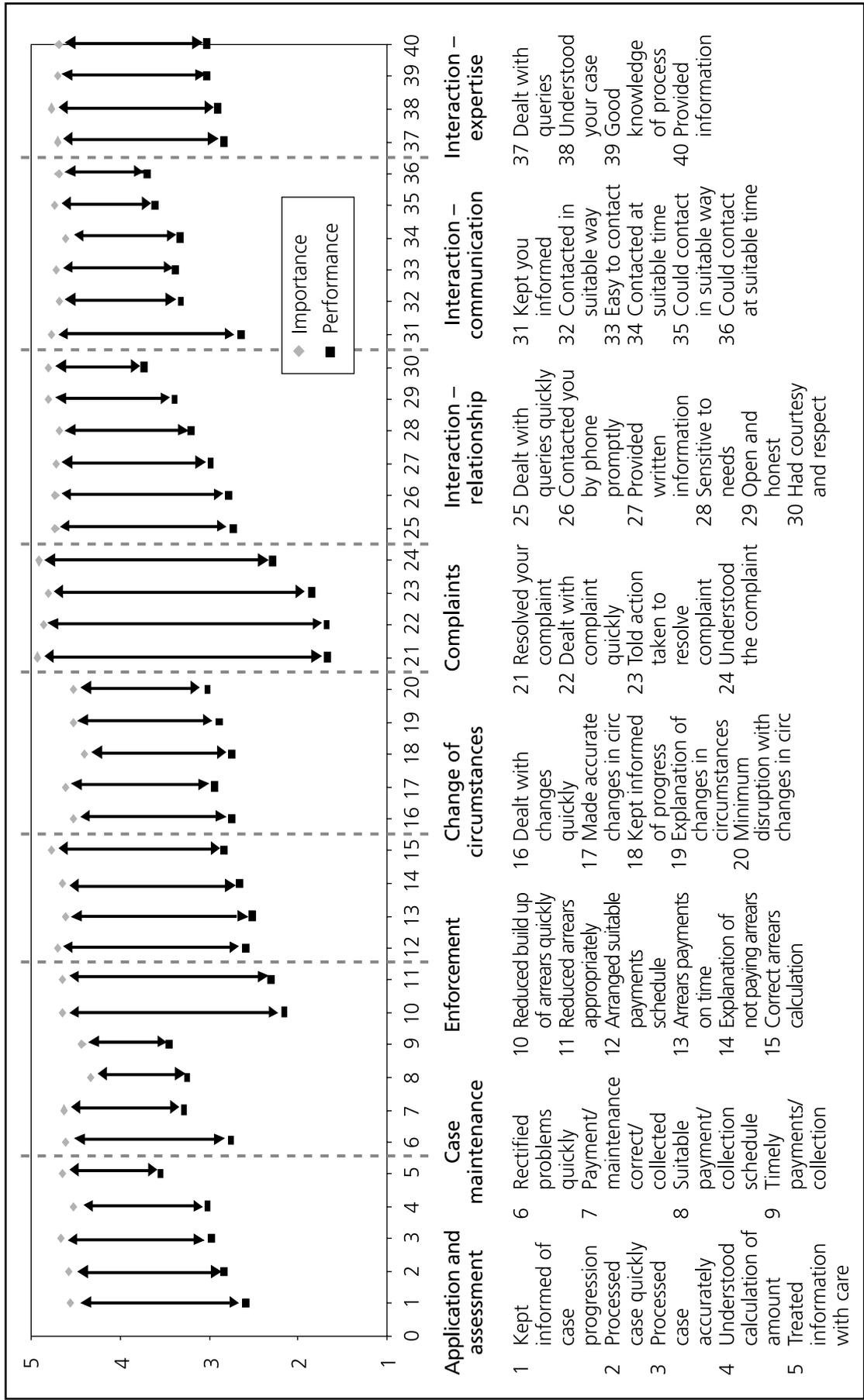
In Figure 10.4, the analysis shows the importance of each of the service delivery areas explored in this chapter plotted against perceived performance and the resulting 'performance gap' between importance and performance.

The results show that, based on the mean importance and performance scores, client expectations are not being met. The largest performance gaps relate to the debt enforcement and complaints elements of CSA service. In general, case maintenance fares the best in relation to meeting client expectations. When considering the specific aspects of each CSA service element where the largest gaps appear, the findings suggest that there are three key themes for performance improvement arising:

- accuracy of actions (processing case accurately, rectifying problems, correct arrears calculation, accuracy of changes in circumstances);
- keeping clients informed (in respect to application and assessment, changes in circumstances and communication across the board); and
- timing/responsiveness (processing applications quickly, reducing arrears quickly, dealing with complaints quickly, dealing with queries on client cases quickly).

<sup>114</sup> In relative terms.

Figure 10.4 Comparison of views across all aspects of the CSA service elements



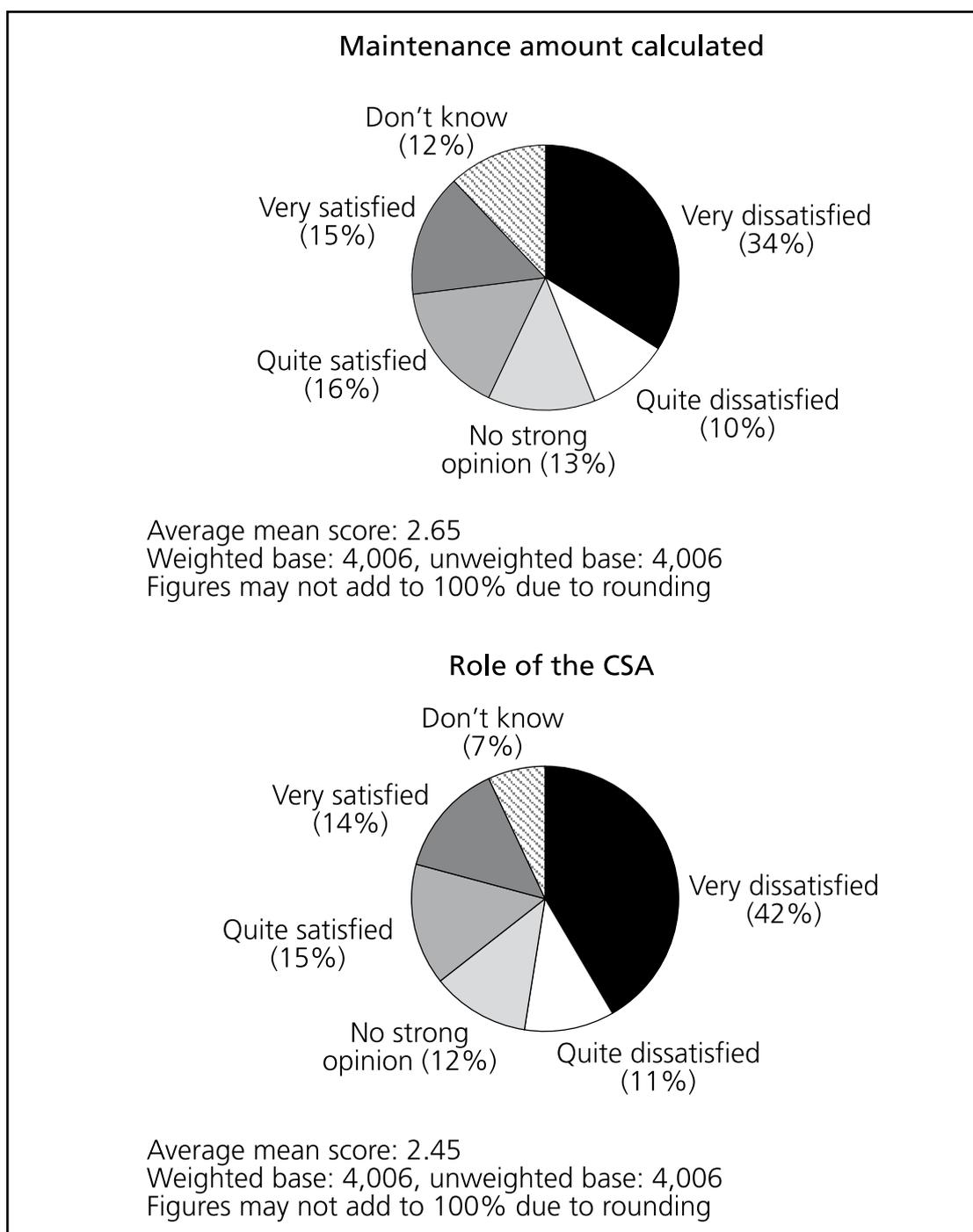
## 10.5 The client experience

### 10.5.1 Client experience overall

In exploring client satisfaction as an overall measure, we asked clients to give their opinion relating to:

- the role of the CSA in managing their child maintenance arrangements; and
- the maintenance amount calculated in their case.

**Figure 10.5 Views on maintenance amount and the role of the CSA**



Just over one quarter of clients surveyed stated that they were satisfied in relation to either the role of the CSA or the maintenance amount calculated (Figure 10.5).<sup>115</sup>

Analysis of verbatim responses when probed on the rationale underpinning expressed dissatisfaction<sup>116</sup> show that the top reasons for dissatisfaction are as follows:

- My payment amount is unfair – (470, 12 per cent);
- They haven't helped me – (462, 12 per cent);
- The process is slow – (450, 11 per cent);
- They don't enforce payments – (450, 11 per cent);
- They are incompetent – (381, ten per cent);
- The system is unfair – (273, seven per cent);
- They don't keep you informed – (242, six per cent);
- Fathers are treated unfairly – (239, six per cent);
- Calls/emails are never responded to – (175, four per cent).

Of those who noted that payments were unfair, 63 per cent were NRPs while 94 per cent of those who expressed dissatisfaction due to payments not being enforced, were PWCs. PWCs and NRPs both noted the system to be unfair in equal terms. Most of those who stated that fathers were treated unfairly were NRPs (83 per cent).

Conversely, of the 1,000 positive responses in support of expressed satisfaction, the main reason was noted as not having any problems with the CSA and the service being prompt was noted by ten per cent. Other issues noted were politeness/friendliness, CSA staff being helpful and honesty.

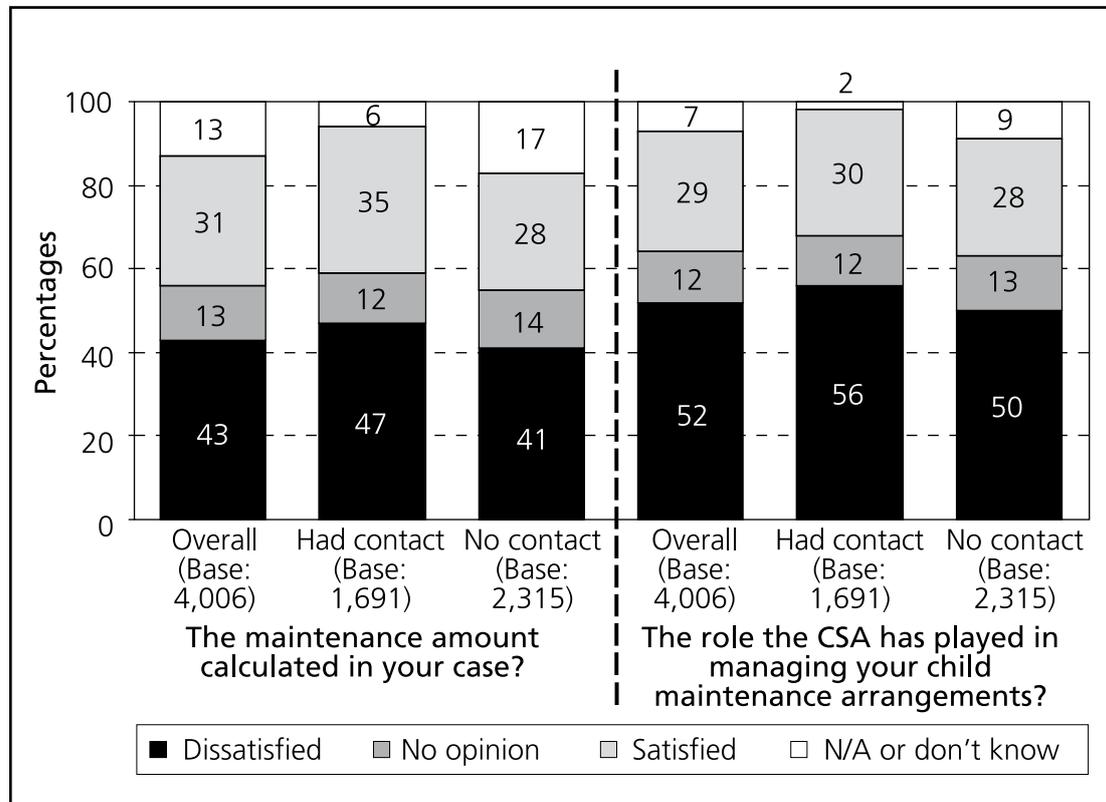
Figure 10.6 shows the results split by those who have accessed the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) and those who have not. The most common response across all sub-groups was 'dissatisfied', however, a higher proportion of those who have been in contact with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007) were more dissatisfied. While the proportions of dissatisfaction are comparatively smaller, there are more respondents who do not have an opinion. Conducting analysis among those who gave an opinion only, shows similar proportions of dissatisfaction across the contact groups.

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<sup>115</sup> This is explored further by various client groups in Chapter 11.

<sup>116</sup> This is a multicode question and as such, the most common responses are given alongside others.

**Figure 10.6 Satisfaction levels of all respondents in respect of three areas**

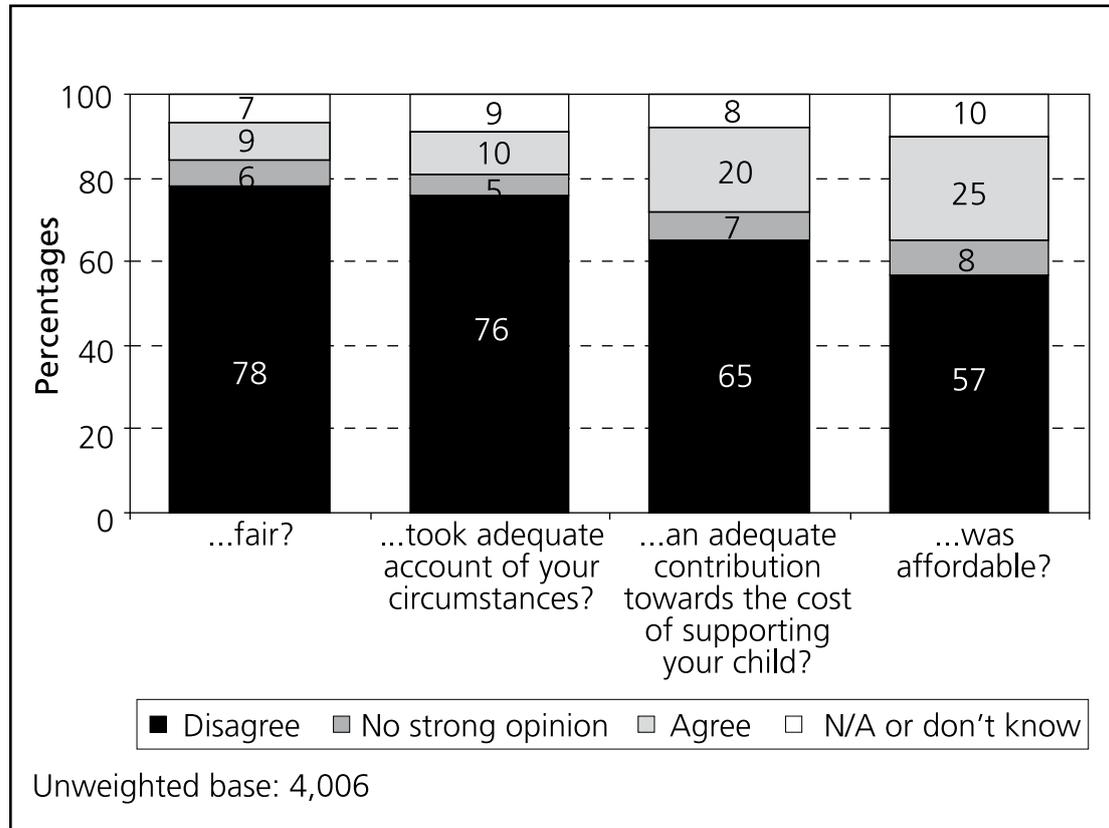


Considering views expressed regarding the fairness, affordability, personalisation (taking account of individual circumstances) and adequacy of contributions towards child support, it is clear that the majority of clients agree that maintenance amounts are unfair and do not take account of individual circumstances (Figure 10.7). Largely there is also agreement that the maintenance amount was unaffordable and inadequate with regard to contributing to child support costs.

The detailed sub-group analysis (explored in Chapter 11) shows that the views of client groups follow the same patterns as client overall, with the following exceptions:

- while more NRPs than PWCs stated that the maintenance amount was adequate (30 per cent and ten per cent respectively), relatively less of this group agreed that the maintenance amounts were affordable (16 per cent and 35 per cent respectively); and
- those with positive relationships with the other parent are more likely to agree<sup>117</sup> with all factors relating to satisfaction with the maintenance amount compared to those with poorer/no relationships with the other parent.

<sup>117</sup> The overall majority of those with positive relationships state the maintenance amount to be unfair, unaffordable, inadequate and didn't take account of personal circumstances.

**Figure 10.7 Attitudes expressed regarding the maintenance amount**

### 10.5.2 Client experience of CSA service provision as a whole

The findings show that client satisfaction follows the pattern of performance and is worse at debt enforcement and complaints elements of the service. In particular, as shown in Table 10.4:

- clients are most dissatisfied with the complaints and debt enforcement processes;
- highest levels of satisfaction relate to the case maintenance process; and
- the highest mean satisfaction score was for the case maintenance processes and the lowest was for the complaints process.

Client views on the performance of the CSA in terms of overall client satisfaction were mainly negative, and this is reflected in a low overall mean score of 2.3.

**Table 10.4 Summary of views across the elements of CSA service**

	Dissatisfied %	No strong opinion %	Satisfied %	Mean satisfaction score	Unweighted base
Application and assessment	57	12	31	2.45	1,020
Case maintenance	42	15	43	2.93	670
Changes in circumstances	53	13	34	2.57	364
Debt enforcement	76	8	16	1.81	418
Complaints	85	5	10	1.56	272
Role of the CSA	56	13	31	2.45	4,006
Maintenance amount calculated	50	15	35	2.65	4,006

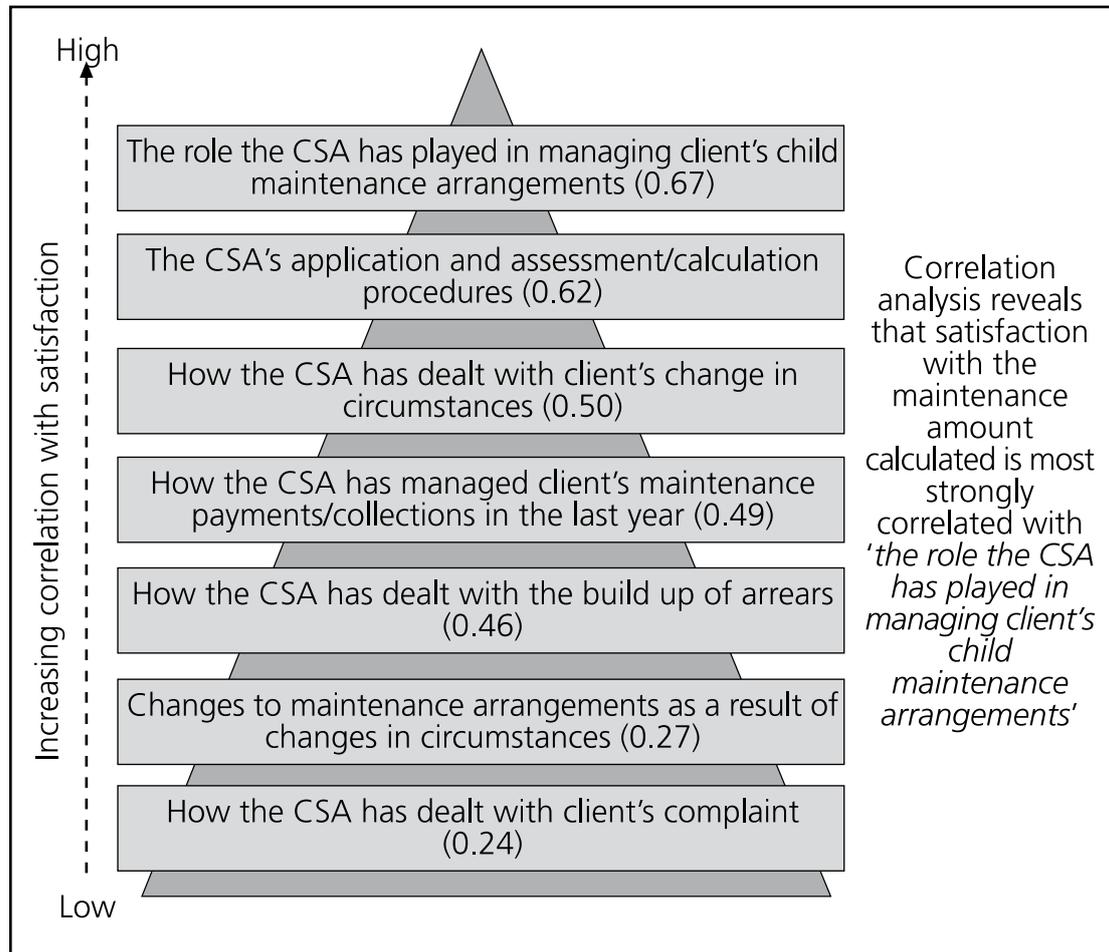
### 10.5.3 Understanding the relationships between overall satisfaction and service provision

In order to understand the relationships between overall satisfaction (maintenance amount and role of CSA) and service provision, we conducted a series of correlations to explore potential relationships between overall satisfaction metrics and performance/satisfaction with each CSA service element and the outcome of change in circumstances (this latter factor was selected due to findings from the focus group research which suggested this was a significant contributing factor to low satisfaction).

#### *Satisfaction with maintenance amounts*

With regard to factors influencing satisfaction with maintenance amounts, the correlation analysis shows that the role the CSA played in managing the child maintenance arrangements has the strongest relationship with levels of satisfaction with the maintenance amount calculated (Figure 10.8). This illustrates that the role of the CSA in keeping maintenance amounts up to date and reflective of current circumstances and as deliverers of policy, is very much associated with the outcomes of policy, i.e. the maintenance amount. The application and assessment part of the CSA service also has a strong relationship with satisfaction with maintenance amounts. This is perhaps to be expected as it is during this part of the process that maintenance amounts are calculated.

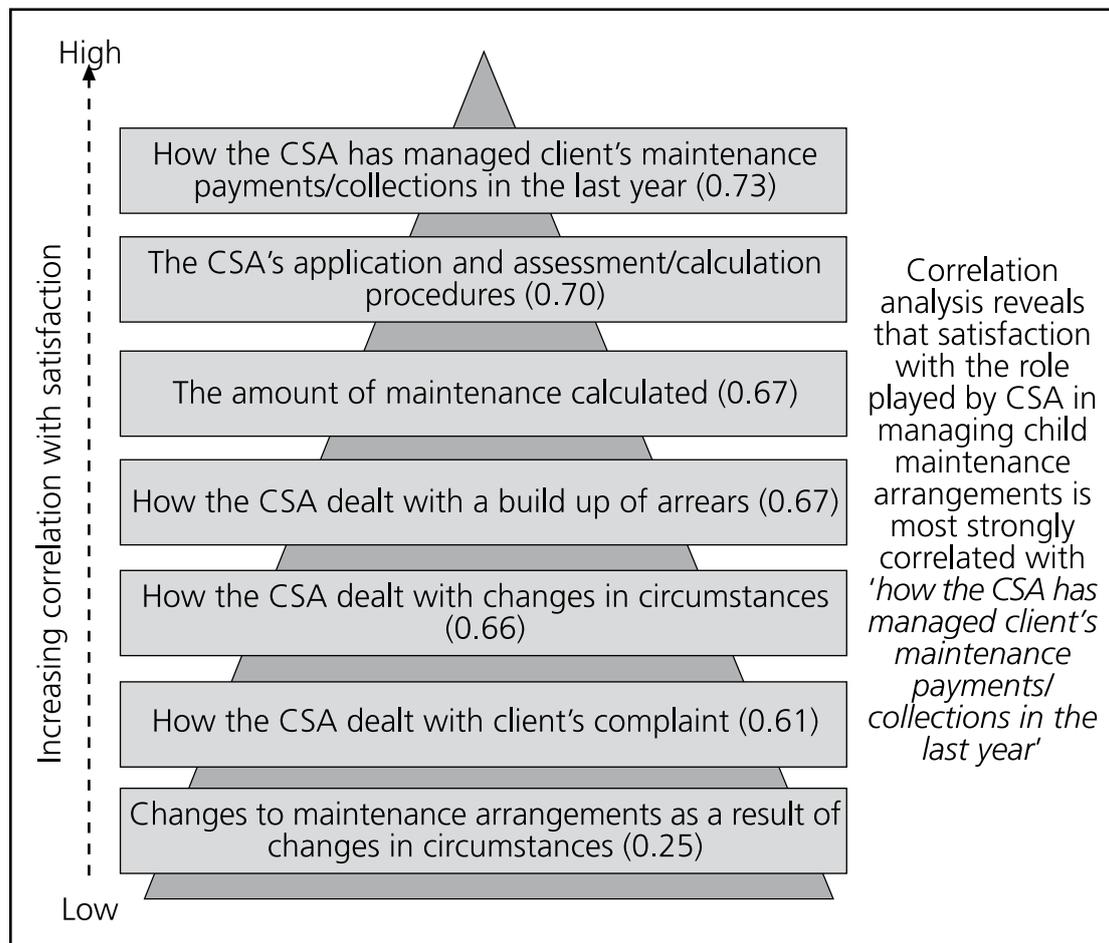
**Figure 10.8 Understanding drivers of satisfaction with maintenance amount**



Satisfaction with the individual parts of the CSA service does not have particularly strong relationships with satisfaction with the maintenance amount, with the exception of application and assessment. The role of the CSA in managing child maintenance also has a strong relationship with satisfaction with the maintenance amount. In view of this fact it could be suggested that any existing perceptions of the CSA as policy makers (setting child maintenance formulae and resulting amounts) and perhaps the intangible aspects of service provision (relationships, etc.) are in some way related to satisfaction with the maintenance amount.

### Satisfaction with the role of the CSA

**Figure 10.9 Understanding drivers of satisfaction with the role of the CSA**



Analysis shows that there are strong relationships between satisfaction with the role of the CSA and satisfaction across all aspects of service provision, specifically case maintenance and application and assessment (Figure 10.9). Broadly speaking, the relationships between service provision and the role of the CSA are stronger than the relationships between service provision and the maintenance amount. The amount of maintenance calculated also has a relationship with satisfaction with the CSA, a finding which is further supported by analysis of verbatim responses where 12 per cent of responses on reasons for dissatisfaction were related to the maintenance amount being unfair and seven per cent related to the perceived unfairness of the system.

## 10.6 Summary

Using the data to take an holistic view of client experience reinforces the message of earlier chapters regarding the high importance of all aspects of service delivery. All clients have high expectations of the CSA. These expectations are, by and large, not being met with particular issues emerging with regard to accuracy of actions, timeliness and keeping client informed. These action areas are supported by the analysis of the performance gaps and verbatim responses regarding expressed dissatisfaction/satisfaction. The majority of clients are dissatisfied with the role of the CSA and with the maintenance amount, comparatively more so with the former than the latter. This pattern is also evident across sub-groups and those who have had no contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey.

Strong relationships between overall satisfaction with the role of the CSA and the elements of CSA service provision are apparent, particularly with regard to case maintenance and application and assessment. This suggests that improvements across service processes, particularly with regard to application and assessment, will have a positive impact on satisfaction.

# 11 Exploring the impact of the client context on client experience

## 11.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to consider how client context factors impact on opinion expressed regarding their experience of the Child Support Agency (CSA)<sup>118</sup>. From the analysis presented in the previous sections, it is evident that there are several client context factors which consistently affect experience more significantly than others, namely:

- client status as a non-resident parent (NRP) or parent with care (PWC);
- relationship with the other parent; and
- level of contact with the child.

Therefore, these client groups are considered in more detail to explore the differences in experience of service delivery, interaction with the CSA and overall satisfaction. In light of the fact that there are two main touch-points with the CSA, i.e. those accessing the service through Jobcentre Plus and those accessing the service directly, a consideration of the benefit/non-benefit intake types as client groups has also been considered here.<sup>119</sup> Based on the consideration of

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<sup>118</sup> This chapter focuses on the findings from those in contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), not on those who have had no contact – further information on those not in contact in the 12 months prior to the survey is in Chapter 3.

<sup>119</sup> Under the child maintenance policy redesign, by 2008, the requirement that PWCs claiming benefit are treated as applying for child maintenance will be removed. This will allow parents to take responsibility for making their own maintenance arrangements in a way which suits them and their children best.

these comparative findings, a summary of the experience of the particular client group in question is presented in order to provide signposts for possible focusing of services depending on the profile of the client.

It should be noted at the outset that, on the whole, the opinions of the different sub-groups do not alter the overall top-line messages regarding their child maintenance experiences. For example, the message across all clients interacting with the CSA in the 12 months prior to the survey regarding the application and assessment process was that all service aspects<sup>120</sup> are important. The opinions of NRPs and PWCs as discrete client groups were consistent with this top-line message. Differences between client groups relate to the degree of importance (or satisfaction/performance ratings) when compared with each other. For example, in relation to application and assessment processes, service aspects rated most important by NRPs were understanding how the maintenance amount was calculated (87 per cent) and processing the application in a reasonable time period (87 per cent). PWCs, on the other hand, considered treating the information provided by them with care (92 per cent) and the accuracy of the assessment to be most important (91 per cent). This illustrates the differences in the relative importance of each aspect to the client groups but also serves to show the consensus of opinion at an overall level. This pattern is the same relating to all client groups considered within this chapter.

This chapter is structured as follows:

- comparing the experiences of NRP and PWC clients;
- the impact of relationship status on the client experience;
- the impact of contact with the child on the client experiences;
- comparing the experiences of benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients; and
- summary.

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<sup>120</sup> Treating information provided with care; understanding how the maintenance amount was calculated; processing the application and assessment accurately; processing the application and assessment within a reasonable time period; and keeping clients informed of progress.

## 11.2 Comparing the experiences of non-resident parent and parent with care clients

### 11.2.1 Experiences of service delivery<sup>121</sup>

All aspects of CSA service elements<sup>122</sup> were important to NRPs and PWCs, but there were also some relative differences in each element and these are as follows:

- the most important aspects of application and assessment to NRPs were understanding how the maintenance amount was calculated (87 per cent) and processing the application in a reasonable time period (87 per cent). To PWCs, on the other hand, treating the information provided by them with care (92 per cent) and the accuracy of the assessment were considered to be most important (91 per cent);
- with regard to case maintenance as a whole, PWCs were more likely to attribute high importance ratings to these service aspects than NRPs – 88 per cent PWCs compared with 80 per cent NRPs, illustrating that this part of the service is more important to PWCs than NRPs. Having a suitable payment schedule (90 per cent) and timely (89 per cent), accurate (89 per cent) payments were most important to PWCs. NRPs considered accuracy of payments to be most important (87 per cent), followed by taking prompt and appropriate action to rectify any problems arising (84 per cent);
- again, with regard to implementing changes in circumstances, relative differences across most service aspects were apparent, most significantly with regard to accuracy of implementing changes in circumstances where 92 per cent of NRPs considered this to be important. The most important aspect of service to PWCs was dealing with changes of circumstances in a reasonable time frame (87 per cent); and
- similar to case maintenance, PWCs were more likely to attribute high importance ratings to debt enforcement service aspects than NRPs – 91 per cent of PWCs compared with 84 per cent of NRPs. Arranging a suitable arrears payment schedule was most important to PWCs, whereas calculating the correct amount of arrears was most important to NRPs.

In considering these findings on the whole, it is possible to suggest that payments, the maintenance thereof and payment of arrears is relatively more important to

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<sup>121</sup> Due to the number of respondents answering the complaint handling section of the questionnaire, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions regarding potential differences of opinion between PWCs and NRPs – the data suggests that understanding the nature of the complaint is most important to NRPs and that there is little to differentiate PWC opinion across all complaint handling service attributes.

<sup>122</sup> Application and assessment; payments and case maintenance; changes in circumstances; enforcement and complaints.

PWCs than NRPs. Whilst these factors are not unimportant to NRPs, their focus tends to be more on understanding and accuracy of maintenance payments, arrears payments and changes in circumstances.

Performance ratings in general across both NRP and PWC client types, were not particularly positive. More differences in opinion between the two client groups were evident in relation to performance than were apparent regarding importance ratings, and these are as follows:

- while NRPs gave lower performance ratings than PWCs with regard to the application and assessment process across most service aspects, both NRPs and PWCs agreed that the best performing area was treating information provided with care (52 per cent and 61 per cent) and the worst was keeping clients informed of progress (34 per cent and 35 per cent). PWCs were more likely to understand the calculation process (47 per cent) and agree that the amount is accurate (46 per cent) than NRPs (40 per cent in both cases);
- differences in views between the two client groups are quite apparent with regard to case maintenance payments. PWCs were more likely to agree that the payment schedule was suitable (56 per cent compared to 47 per cent) and that the maintenance amount was correct, 55 per cent compared to 48 per cent. While most respondents in both client groups did not agree that the CSA took prompt and appropriate action to rectify any problems with the maintenance payment, this sentiment was particularly strong among NRPs where 46 per cent disagreed strongly in comparison with 28 per cent of PWCs;
- again, with regard to debt enforcement, the top-line views of PWCs and NRPs are similar and overall opinions on delivery of this aspect of service is low. The strength of opinion does vary between the two groups, particularly with regard to arranging a suitable payment schedule and making sure arrears payment were on time – PWCs were more likely to disagree that these service aspects had been delivered than NRPs. Forty-nine per cent of PWCs disagreed that a suitable arrears payment schedule had been agreed, compared to 39 per cent of NRPs and 51 per cent of PWCs who disagreed strongly that arrears payments were on time in comparison with 26 per cent of NRPs (45 per cent of NRPs agreed that arrears payments were on time, compared to 20 per cent of PWCs). This reflects focus group findings where PWCs often expressed strong opinions regarding their dissatisfaction with the payment of arrears;

- while opinion on performance was not particularly positive across both groups regarding how the CSA deals with changes in circumstances, considering the data relating to all aspects<sup>123</sup> of dealing with changes in circumstances, shows that a greater proportion of PWCs than NRPs agreed that service aspects had been delivered – 46 per cent compared to 36 per cent. This reflects focus group findings where NRPs felt strongly that changes in circumstances were not dealt with appropriately; and
- while the number of respondents having been through the complaints procedure was relatively small, it is clear that of those complainants responding to the survey and agreeing that the complaints process<sup>124</sup> worked well on the whole, the majority (over two-thirds) were PWCs.

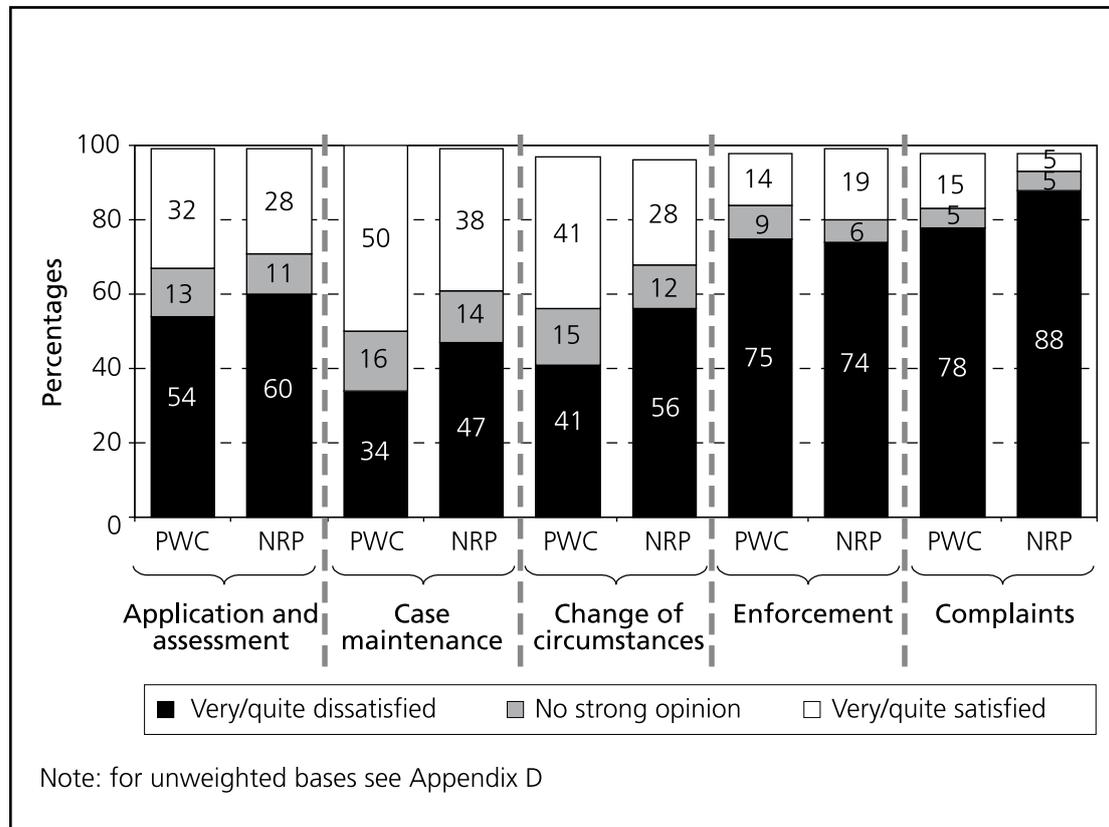
As illustrated in Figure 11.1, PWC and NRP clients follow the same pattern of satisfaction/dissatisfaction across the aspects of CSA service, with lower levels of dissatisfaction in those elements of service which clients would tend to encounter earlier in their experience with the CSA (i.e. application and assessment and case maintenance) in comparison to aspects of service relating to debt enforcement and complaints. The differences between NRPs and PWCs was relatively more marked in case maintenance and dealing with changes in circumstances where PWCs tended to be more satisfied than NRPs.

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<sup>123</sup> Implementing changes accurately; keeping clients informed of progress; explaining changes resulting from a change in circumstances; dealing with changes in a minimum timeframe; and ensuring minimum disruption to maintenance payments.

<sup>124</sup> Understanding the nature of the complaint; dealing with the complaint in a reasonable time period; keeping clients informed; and resolving the complaint.

**Figure 11.1 Satisfaction with each element of CSA service – the PWC and NRP perspective**



In general, NRPs rate performance less positively and are also more dissatisfied with service delivery than PWCs.

### 11.2.2 Interactions with the CSA

The three components of interaction, namely: relationships; communication; and expertise of CSA employees, had high levels of importance attached to them by both PWCs and NRPs. There was some differentiation of opinion with regard to these more intangible aspects of service delivery between the two client groups and these are as follows:

- staff being open and honest (97 per cent) and treating clients with courtesy and respect (96 per cent) were the most important aspects of relationships to PWCs. This reflects the focus group findings, where PWCs often noted confusion regarding CSA activities and a lack of trust in CSA frontline employees. NRPs considered courtesy and respect to be the most important relationship factor, (95 per cent), which also reflects focus group findings where NRPs often expressed opinions relating to their perception of being treated unfairly; and

- understanding the details of their case was most important to NRPs in relation to the expertise of CSA employees. This, again, is reflective of the focus group findings and may also be linked to opinions expressed by NRPs regarding the relative lack of flexibility in the child maintenance rules, particularly regarding taking account of personal circumstances.

With regard to NRP and PWC views on their relationship with the CSA, communication between themselves and the CSA and expertise of CSA employees, PWCs were more likely to agree that the CSA had performed well:

- on average 52 per cent of PWCs agreed with all statements relating to relationships<sup>125</sup> compared to 44 per cent of NRPs;
- 58 per cent of PWCs agreed with communication<sup>126</sup> statements in comparison with 48 per cent of NRPs – this was reflected in the detailed question on communications received by clients from the CSA, where NRPs were less likely to agree that letters and leaflets provided all information or were easy to understand than PWCs.<sup>127</sup> Particular issues for NRPs were being able to contact the CSA in a way and at a time that suited them; and
- 48 per cent of PWCs agreed with aspects relating to expertise<sup>128</sup> of CSA employees, compared to 37 per cent of NRPs. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the data suggest that NRPs perceive themselves to have less positive relationships with the CSA than PWCs.

Of particular note are findings relating to being treated with courtesy and respect and CSA employees being sensitive to client needs, where 20 per cent more PWCs than NRPs agreed that CSA employees treat them in this way – clearly the handling of NRPs and the relationship between them and CSA employees were less positively viewed by this group. This reflects focus group findings, where NRPs often expressed the view that they perceived themselves to be part of the process (the source of child maintenance funds) rather than a client of the service, sometimes treated with the pre-conception of trying to avoid their child maintenance responsibilities.

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<sup>125</sup> Openness and honesty; courtesy and respect; sensitivity; responsiveness; keeping commitments made to contact clients; and providing written information when requested.

<sup>126</sup> Contacting and being contacted by the CSA in a way and time that suited the client; ease of contact; and keeping clients informed.

<sup>127</sup> NRPs were positive about communications received from the CSA but not as positive as PWCs.

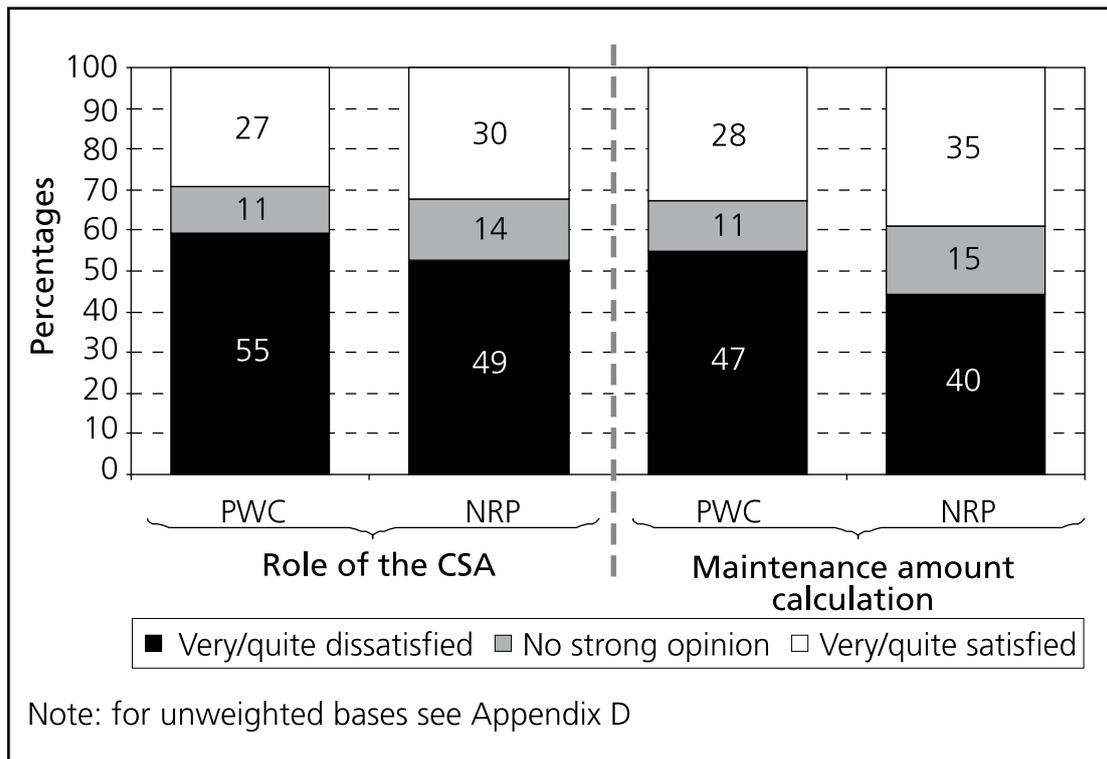
<sup>128</sup> Good knowledge of child maintenance process; providing information needed; understanding the details of the case; and dealing with any queries or issues raised.

### 11.2.3 Overall satisfaction

As illustrated in Figure 11.2, the majority of PWCs and NRPs were dissatisfied with the role that the CSA played in managing clients' child maintenance arrangements, and a greater proportion of PWCs than NRPs were dissatisfied. This is also the case for satisfaction with maintenance amounts. In general, a greater proportion of both client groups expressed dissatisfaction with the CSA's role in managing child maintenance arrangements than with the maintenance amount calculated.

Considering views expressed regarding the fairness, affordability, personalisation and adequacy of contributions towards child support, it is clear that the majority of PWCs and NRPs agreed that maintenance amounts are unfair and did not take account of individual circumstances (personalisation). Largely, there was also agreement that maintenance amounts were unaffordable and inadequate with regard to contributing to child support costs. However, more PWCs than NRPs agree that the maintenance amount is affordable (35 per cent compared to 16 per cent). This may reflect focus group findings where some PWCs thought NRPs could afford to make payments but were avoiding doing so – a point of some contention among NRPs in focus groups. Opinion of the adequacy of the maintenance contribution to child support costs also differed between NRPs and PWCs, with 30 per cent of NRPs agreeing it was adequate in comparison to ten per cent of PWCs.

**Figure 11.2 Overall satisfaction – a comparison of PWCs and NRPs**



### 11.2.4 Summary

The analysis of the findings relating to PWCs and NRPs shows that while both client groups were on the whole dissatisfied with the service delivered by CSA and their interaction with the Agency, there were particular pockets of difficulty for NRPs. Largely these were around case maintenance issues regarding suitability of payment schedules and accuracy of the payments including dealing with problems that arise. This spilled over into poor opinions regarding dealing with changes in circumstances as often maintenance payments and calculation thereof are linked to changes in circumstances for existing clients.

Despite the strength of opinion that existed regarding the perceived inaccuracies of payments among NRPs, this group was more satisfied with the amount calculated than with the role of the CSA. This may be linked to the fact that NRPs perceived themselves as having poor relationships with the CSA, particularly around issues concerning being treated with courtesy, respect and sensitivity to their needs. There were also difficulties pertaining to getting in touch with the CSA, and also the communication materials appeared to be relatively more difficult for NRPs to understand and glean information from than they were for PWCs.

## 11.3 The impact of relationship status on the client experience

### 11.3.1 Experiences of service delivery

In segmenting clients according to their current relationship with the other parent (relationship status), four groupings were used: good relationship; neither good nor bad; bad relationship; and no contact with the other parent. As was the case with NRP and PWC client groups, all elements of CSA service were important to clients regardless of the positive or negative status of their relationship with the other parent.

Very few differences in the relative importance of each element of CSA service delivery were noted<sup>129</sup> and where differences existed, these were concentrated in views expressed regarding debt enforcement activities. Those with no contact with the other parent or poorer relationships attribute more importance to explaining the consequences of arrears not being paid<sup>130</sup>, ensuring arrears calculations are

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<sup>129</sup> Grouping relationship status into four variables yields small sub-samples and differences often lie within the margin of error. It is, therefore, not appropriate to present such findings given the degree of uncertainty regarding their reliability.

<sup>130</sup> Ninety-three per cent of those with no contact with the other parent consider explanation of the consequences of arrears to be important compared with 82 per cent of those with good relationships.

correct<sup>131</sup> and arranging a suitable arrears schedule<sup>132</sup> than those on better terms with the other parent.

In considering the fact that through most aspects of service delivery no pattern of difference was clearly discernible, it is possible to conclude that in comparison to the PWC/NRP grouping, this type of segmentation is not particularly relevant to the importance attributed to service aspects. Findings regarding debt enforcement were the exception as differences are apparent with those with poorer relationships attributing higher importance ratings to service aspects when compared with those with more positive relationships.

Performance ratings in general across relationship status client groups were not particularly positive. As was the case of the PWC/NRP client groups, more differences in opinion between the client groups were evident in relation to performance than were apparent regarding importance ratings, and these are as follows:

- those with poorer relationships or no contact with the other parent gave lower performance ratings than those with more positive relationships with regard to the application and assessment process across all service aspects. Both those with bad relations with the other parent and those on good terms agreed that the best performing area was treating information provided with care (50 per cent and 67 per cent). Those with less positive relationships considered the worst performing area to be keeping clients informed of progress (26 per cent – no contact group and 32 per cent – bad relationship group). Those with no contact with the other parent were consistently more likely to consider performance to be poorer than those in the other relationship segments;
- the pattern of poor relationship/no contact client groups attributing lower performance ratings than those on better terms with the other parent continued with regard to case maintenance. This pattern was particularly marked with regard to accuracy of amounts where 41 per cent of those on bad terms with the other parent agreed with the statement in comparison to 57 per cent of those on better terms;
- again, with regard to debt enforcement, the top-line views of the relationship-based client segments were similar and overall opinions on delivery of this aspect of service were low. Sample sizes are small and while the data suggests that those with no contact with the other parent were less satisfied we cannot be sure that these differences are statistically significant; and

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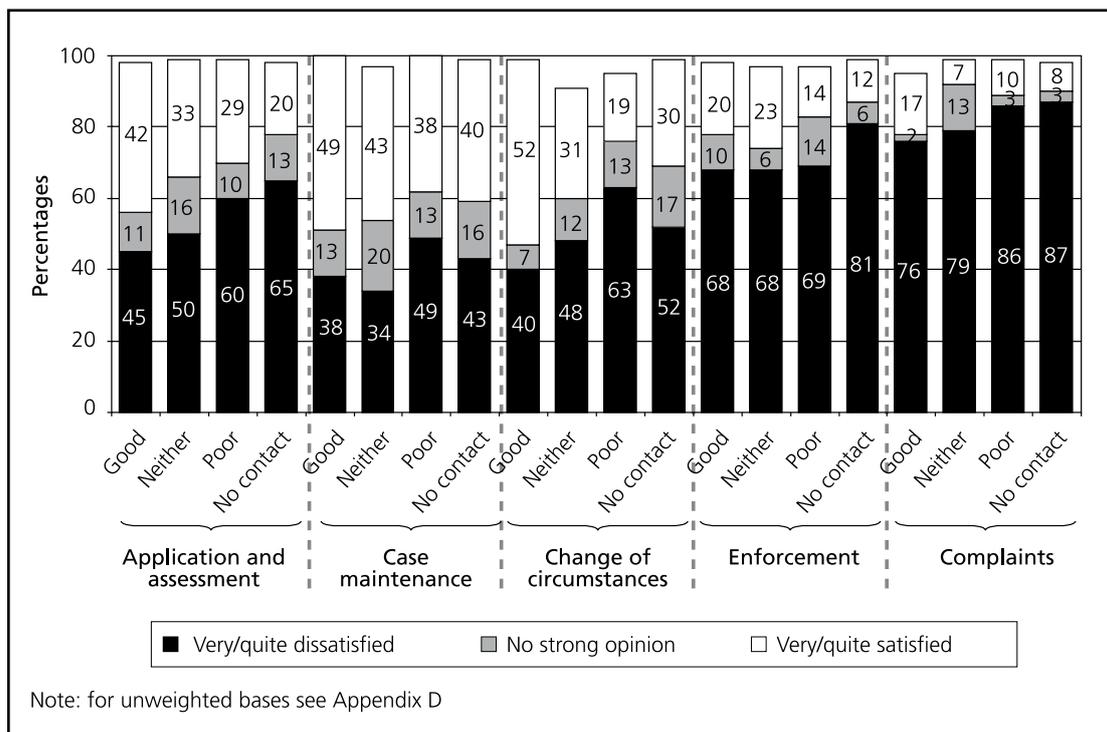
<sup>131</sup> Ninety-four per cent of those with no contact with the other parent and 92 per cent of those with a bad relationship consider correct arrears calculations to be important compared with 78 per cent of those with good relationships.

<sup>132</sup> Ninety-four per cent of those with no contact or a bad relationship with the other parent, consider arranging a suitable arrears payments schedule to be important compared with 78 per cent of those with good relationships.

- opinion on performance was not particularly positive across the groups regarding how the CSA deals with changes in circumstances. The data relating to all aspects of dealing with changes in circumstances shows that a greater proportion of those on better terms with the other parent in comparison to all other groups agreed that service aspects have been delivered.

As illustrated in Figure 11.3, all relationship status groups follow the same pattern of satisfaction/dissatisfaction across the elements of CSA service, with lower levels of dissatisfaction in those elements of service which clients would tend to encounter earlier in their experience with the CSA (i.e. application and assessment and case maintenance) in comparison to aspects of service relating to debt enforcement and complaints.

**Figure 11.3 Satisfaction with element of CSA service – the relationship perspective<sup>133</sup>**



In general, those with poorer relationships with the other parent rate performance less positively and are also more dissatisfied with service delivery than those on better terms with the other parent.

### 11.3.2 Interactions with the CSA

The three components of interaction, namely: relationships; communication; and expertise of CSA employees, had high levels of importance attached to them by all client groups and little difference of opinion was apparent across the four relationship client groups.

<sup>133</sup> This is in terms of relationship with the other parent.

With regard to views on their relationship with the CSA, communication between themselves and the CSA and expertise of CSA employees, those on good terms with the other parent were more likely to agree that the CSA had performed well than those on bad terms with the other parent:

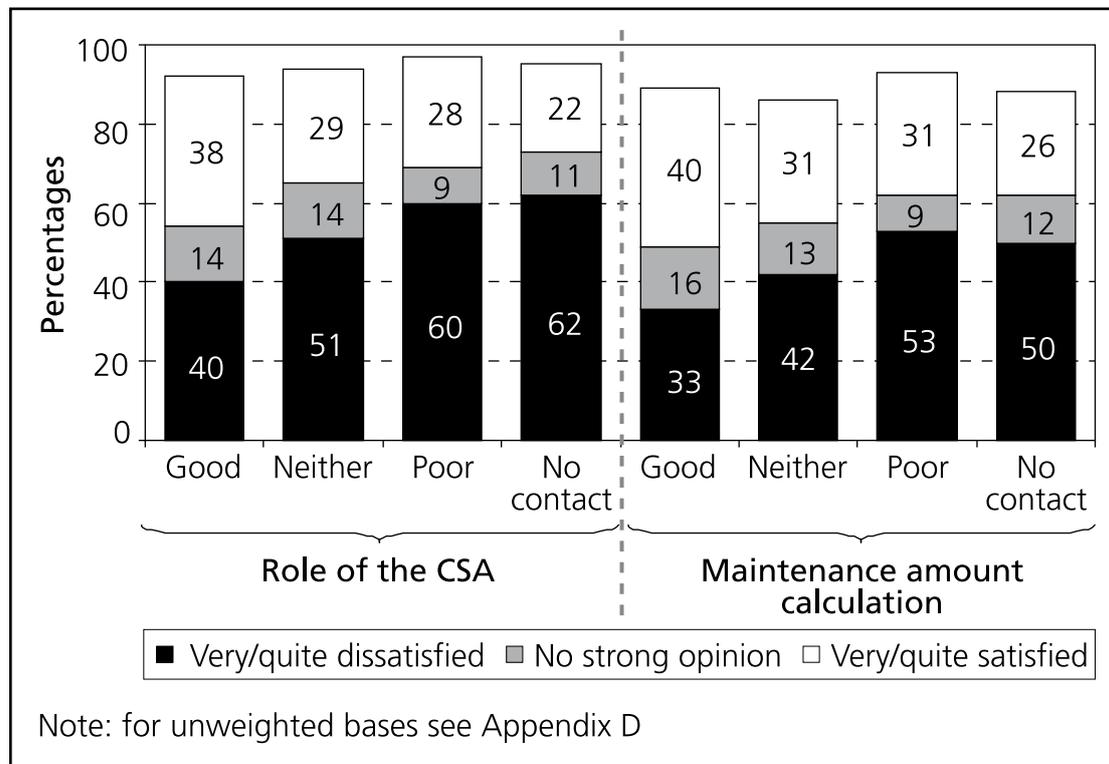
- on average 53 per cent of those on better terms with the other parent agreed with all statements relating to relationships compared to 45 per cent of those on more negative terms with the other parent;
- 57 per cent of those with a more positive relationships status agreed with communication statements in comparison with 50 per cent of those on bad terms with the other parent – this is reflected in the detailed question on communications received by clients from the CSA, where those with a bad relationship were less likely to agree that letters and leaflets provided all information or were easy to understand than those on good terms with the other parent; and
- views across the relationship segments regarding expertise of CSA employees were broadly similar across all expertise aspects with two exceptions. Those on bad terms with the other parent expressed particular concern around CSA employee understanding the details of their case and being able to deal with any queries or issues raised about their case.

### **11.3.3 Overall satisfaction**

As illustrated in Figure 11.4, the majority of clients in all groups were dissatisfied with the role that the CSA played in managing their child maintenance arrangements, and a greater proportion of those with poorer relationships were dissatisfied. This was also the case for satisfaction with maintenance amounts. In general, a greater proportion of clients expressed dissatisfaction with the CSA's role in managing child maintenance arrangements than with the maintenance amount calculated.

Considering views expressed regarding the fairness, affordability, personalisation and adequacy of contributions towards child support, it was clear that the majority of clients across relationship segments agreed that maintenance amounts are unfair and do not take account of individual circumstances (personalisation). Largely, there was also agreement that maintenance amounts are unaffordable and inadequate with regard to contributing to child support costs. However, relatively more clients with positive relationships agreed that the maintenance amount is fair, affordable, takes account of individual circumstances and is an adequate contribution to child support costs.

**Figure 11.4 Overall satisfaction – comparing views across relationship segments**



### 11.3.4 Summary

The analysis of the findings relating to relationship based segmentation shows that while all client groups are, on the whole, dissatisfied with the service delivered by CSA and their interaction with the Agency, there are particular pockets of difficulty for those with poor relationships with the other parent and those with no contact at all. These two latter groups consistently rated performance on application and assessment comparatively lower and expressed particular dissatisfaction with the accuracy of the maintenance amount calculated.

Despite the strength of opinion that existed regarding the perceived inaccuracies of payments among poor/no relationship groups, these groups were more satisfied with the amount calculated than with the role of the CSA. This was similar to findings regarding the NRP group. This finding may be linked to the fact that those with poor/no relationship with the other parent consistently rated service delivery as lower than those on better terms with the other parent, particularly in relation to application and assessment and case maintenance. Views expressed on communication with the CSA, expertise of CSA employees and relationship with the CSA were, broadly speaking, also consistently lower in these poor/no relationship groups, particularly around understanding of their case and being able to answer queries relating to their case – this is also likely to influence opinion expressed regarding the role of the CSA.

## 11.4 The impact of contact with the child on the client experiences

### 11.4.1 Experiences of service delivery

Three variables were used to analyse potential variations in views expressed according to the amount of contact with the child and these were: frequent contact; infrequent contact; and no contact at all. It is important to note that contact data is derived from PWCs and NRPs but always refers to the amount of contact by the NRP. PWCs reported lower levels of contact than NRPs, e.g. 61 per cent of NRPs reported having regular contact with the child, while 40 per cent of PWCs reported that the NRP has regular contact, 36 per cent of PWCs reported the NRP to have no contact at all and 23 per cent of NRPs reported having no contact with the child. These are not linked cases, so it cannot be concluded if there is any consistent under- or over-reporting of contact by either parent and it is impossible to validate reported contact from either perspective.

Similar to findings from the analysis of PWC/NRP groups and relationship groups, all elements of CSA service were important to clients regardless of the level of contact had with the child and no pertinent differences between the groups were apparent. This further reinforces the suggestion made earlier that PWC/NRP segmentation is most relevant to importance ratings.

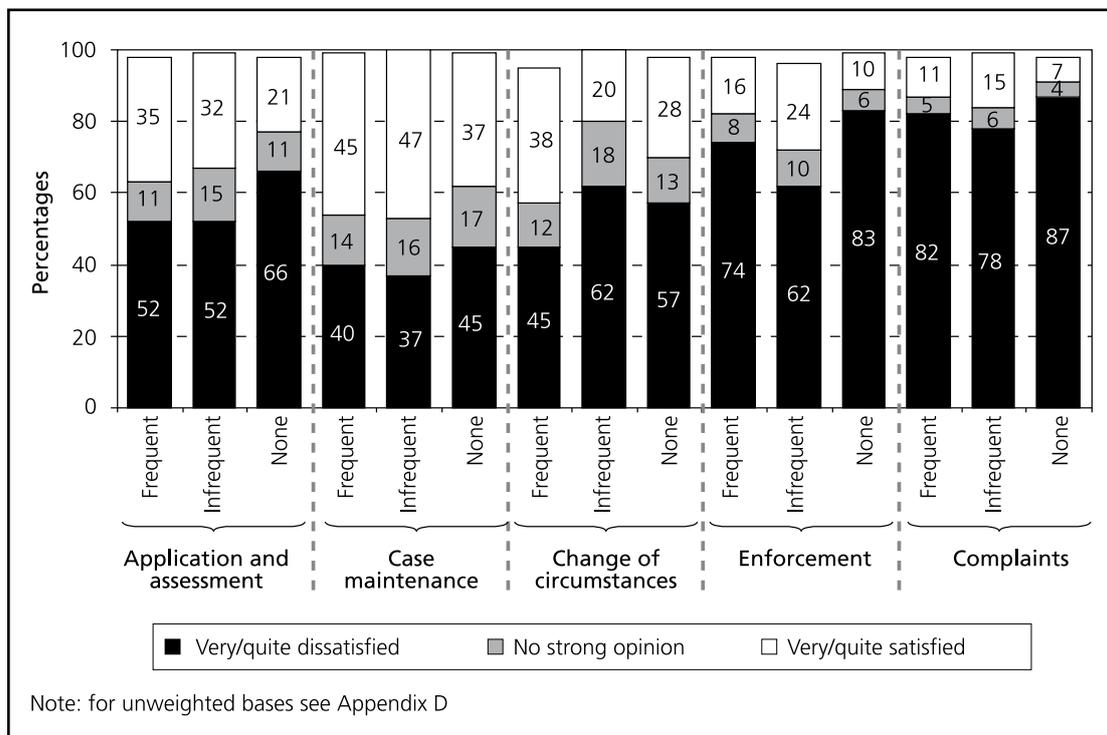
Performance ratings in general were again not particularly positive across the client groups. Some differences of opinion were apparent as follows:

- those with irregular or no child contact with the other parent gave lower performance ratings than those with regular contact with regard to the application and assessment process across all service aspects. Differences were most stark when comparing no contact to regular contact groups. For example, on average, 49 per cent of respondents with regular contact with the child agree that the CSA delivered with regard to application and assessment aspects of service in comparison to an average of 36 per cent of respondents with no contact with the child. This consistently poorer performance rating was also a factor of the relationship-based performance comparison. Contact and relationship status, perhaps following the same pattern as analysis, showed that the better the relationship with the other parent the more contact there was with the child, (43 per cent of those on bad terms with the other parent had infrequent or no contact with the child and 70 per cent of those not in contact with the other parent had no or infrequent contact with the child);
- in line with the groups already described within this chapter, the three child contact groups agreed that the best performing area was treating information provided with care (62 per cent, regular contact group, 54 per cent, irregular contact group, and 50 per cent, no contact group). These groups also agree that keeping clients informed of progress was the poorest performing area, (39 per cent, regular contact group, 37 per cent, irregular contact group, and 27 per cent, no contact group); and

- with the exception of taking prompt action to rectify any problems with maintenance, clients with no contact with the child were more likely to rate performance across case maintenance service provision less positively than those with regular contact. This pattern continued into views expressed regarding the debt enforcement process and CSA management of changes in circumstances, although sample sizes constrain the robustness of this finding to some extent.

In general, those with no contact with the child rate performance less positively and were also more dissatisfied with service delivery than those with regular contact. Figure 11.5 illustrates that those with no contact with the child were more dissatisfied than those with regular contact. The relationship between child contact and satisfaction did not appear to be consistent as on occasion those with infrequent contact are more satisfied than those with regular contact and those with no contact are more satisfied than those with irregular contact. This is, in part explained by recoding of the original five variables into three to create sample sizes sufficient for sub-group analysis.

**Figure 11.5 Satisfaction with each element of CSA service – the child contact perspective<sup>134</sup>**



### 11.4.2 Interactions with the CSA

Similar to findings stemming from comparison of PWCs with NRPs and across relationship groups, the three components of interaction have high levels of importance attached to them by all client groups and little difference of opinion was apparent across child contact segments.

<sup>134</sup> This is in respect of frequency of contact by the NRP and the child.

With regard to views on their relationship with the CSA, communication between themselves and the CSA and expertise of CSA employees, those with regular child contact were more likely to agree that the CSA had performed well than those with no contact with the child. Differences were most apparent with regard to relationship metrics, where, on average, 52 per cent of those with regular contact with the child agreed with all statements compared to 44 per cent of those with no child contact. There were particular issues for clients with no contact with the child regarding the CSA dealing with queries in a reasonable period of time, contacting clients when they said they would and providing written information when asked for.

Clients with no contact with the child also rated their communication less positively than those with regular contact, particularly regarding keeping clients informed of what was happening in their case (28 per cent agreed in the no contact group compared with 39 per cent in the regular contact group). This reflects earlier findings regarding keeping clients informed during the application and assessment process.

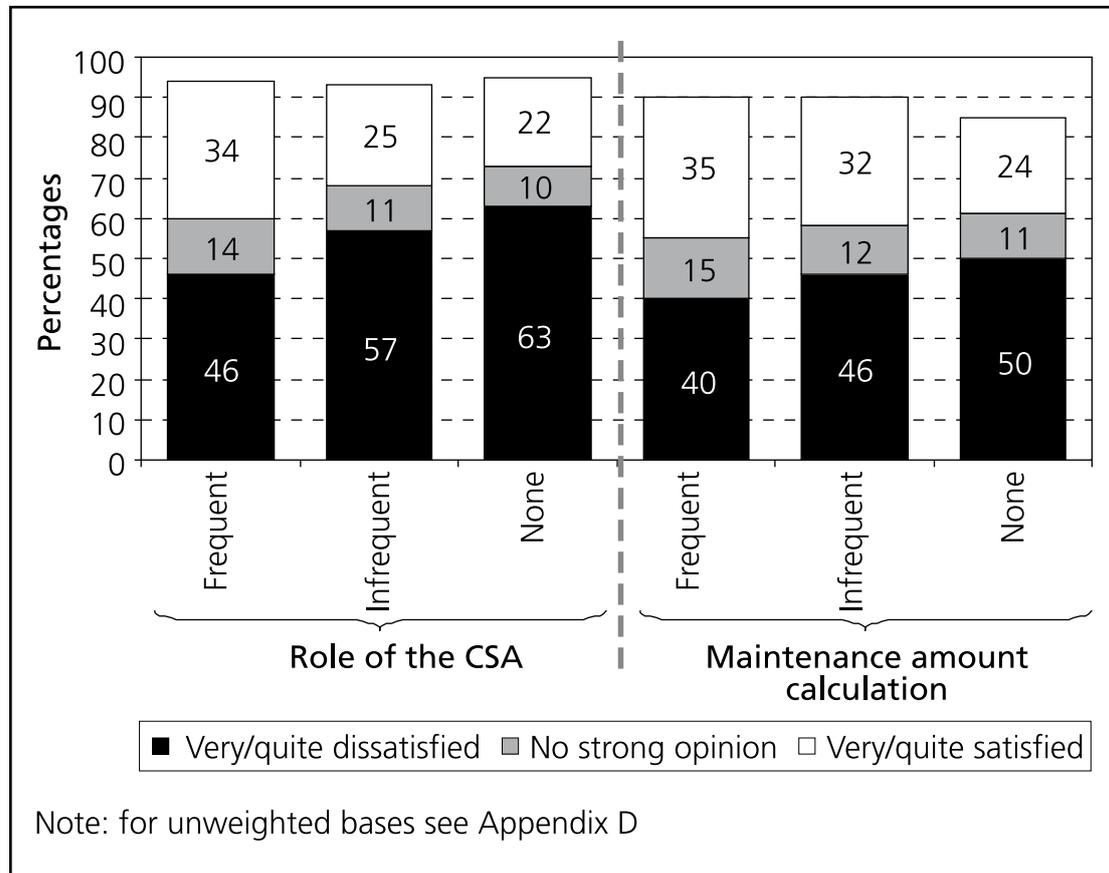
Views across the child contact groups again reflected the relationship segments regarding expertise of CSA employees. Views expressed were broadly similar across all the expertise aspects with two exceptions. Those with no child contact expressed particular concern around CSA employees understanding the details of their case and being able to deal with any queries or issues raised about their case.

### **11.4.3 Overall satisfaction**

As illustrated in Figure 11.6, the greater proportion of clients in all groups were dissatisfied with the role that the CSA played in managing clients' child maintenance arrangements, and a greater proportion of those with infrequent or no contact with the child were dissatisfied compared to those with regular child contact. This is also the case for satisfaction with maintenance amounts. In general, a greater proportion of clients expressed dissatisfaction with the CSA's role in managing child maintenance arrangements than with the maintenance amount calculated – this reflects earlier sub-group analysis.

Considering views expressed regarding the fairness, affordability, personalisation and adequacy of contributions towards child support, it is clear that the majority of all clients, regardless of level of child contact, agreed that maintenance amounts are unfair, unaffordable, do not take account of individual circumstances (personalisation) and are not an adequate contribution towards the costs of child support.

**Figure 11.6 Overall satisfaction – comparing views across child contact segments**



#### 11.4.4 Summary

The analysis of the findings relating to the child contact perspective showed that while all client groups were, on the whole, dissatisfied with the service delivered by the CSA and their interaction with the Agency, there were particular areas of difficulty for those with no contact with the child. In general, those with no contact with the child rated performance less positively and were more dissatisfied with service delivery than those with regular contact. This reflects the ratings given by those who had a poor relationship or no contact at all with the other parent, suggesting that contact and relationship status perhaps follow the same pattern, as analysis shows that the better the relationship is with the other parent, the more contact there is with the child (27 per cent of those with a bad reputation with the other parent had no child contact and 67 per cent of those with no relationship had no child contact).

Similar to earlier findings from an analysis of the client status (i.e. NRP or PWC) and parent relationship sub-groups, those with irregular or no contact with the child were more dissatisfied with the role of the CSA than with the maintenance amount calculated. This finding may be linked to the fact that those with irregular or no child contact consistently rated service delivery as lower than those with regular contact with the child, particularly in relation to application and assessment.

Views expressed on communication with the CSA, expertise of CSA employees and relationship with the CSA were, broadly speaking, also consistently lower among those who had no contact with the child, particularly around the CSA being able to deal with their queries within a reasonable period of time, contacting them when they said they would and providing them with written information when they asked for it.

## 11.5 Comparing the experiences of benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients

### 11.5.1 Experiences of service delivery

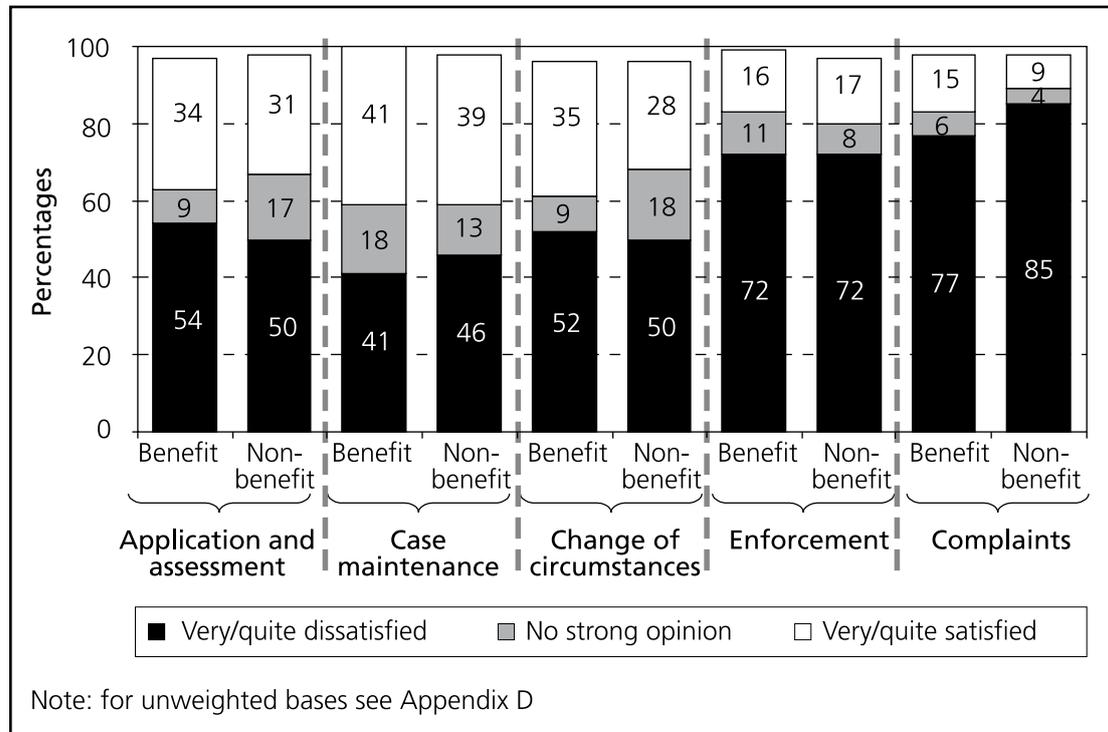
All elements of CSA service were important to benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients. With regard to service delivery, benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients attributed broadly similar levels of importance to all aspects of service delivery. However, there were some limited instances of relative differences in views expressed between these two client types and these are as follows:

- more non-benefit intake clients than benefit intake clients considered understanding how the maintenance amount was calculated to be important (92 per cent compared to 83 per cent) – this is also the most important factor to non-benefit intake clients, whereas treating the information provided with care was most important to benefit intake clients. Comparatively more non-benefit intake clients considered processing applications in a reasonable timeframe to be important (91 per cent compared to 83 per cent); and
- timeliness, in the form of dealing with changes in circumstances in a reasonable timeframe, again was comparatively more important to non-benefit intake clients than benefit intake clients (87 per cent compared to 79 per cent).

Following the pattern of previous client groups discussed within this chapter, views on performance across service delivery aspects were less than satisfactory. This was a consistent message from benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients. Occasions where the opinions of benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients differ were isolated and related firstly to understanding of the maintenance amount and secondly to taking prompt and appropriate action to rectifying problems arising with the maintenance payments/collections. In the case of the former, a larger proportion of non-benefit intake clients (57 per cent) than benefit intake clients (44 per cent) perceived themselves to have understood how the CSA calculated the maintenance amount. In the case of the latter, a larger proportion of benefit intake clients (39 per cent) than non-benefit intake clients (31 per cent) agreed that the CSA took prompt and appropriate action to rectify any problems arising with payments/collections.

Figure 11.7 illustrates satisfaction levels of benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients and it is clear that satisfaction levels followed a similar pattern to the all client profile where dissatisfaction was comparatively higher in the debt enforcement and complaints lines of service than in other service delivery processes.

**Figure 11.7 Satisfaction with each element of CSA service – the relationship perspective**



There was no clear pattern with regard to one client group being consistently more satisfied than the other – benefit intake clients were more dissatisfied in application and assessment and non-benefit intake clients were more dissatisfied with regard to case maintenance and complaints. The proportions were similar across the two client groups with regard to changes in circumstances and debt enforcement. Coupled with the performance analysis presented earlier, these findings suggest that intake type (status as benefit intake/non-benefit intake) is not a strong driver of differentiation in opinion with regard to views expressed on service delivery.

### 11.5.2 Interactions with the CSA

Similar to findings stemming from comparison of other client groups, the three components of interaction (relationships, communication and expertise) had high levels of importance attached to them by all client groups. Results suggest that, while client expectations were high, non-benefit intake clients had marginally higher expectations than benefit intake clients<sup>135</sup>. This may be due to the fact that non-benefit intake clients may have chosen to use the CSA and this may have raised expectation levels.

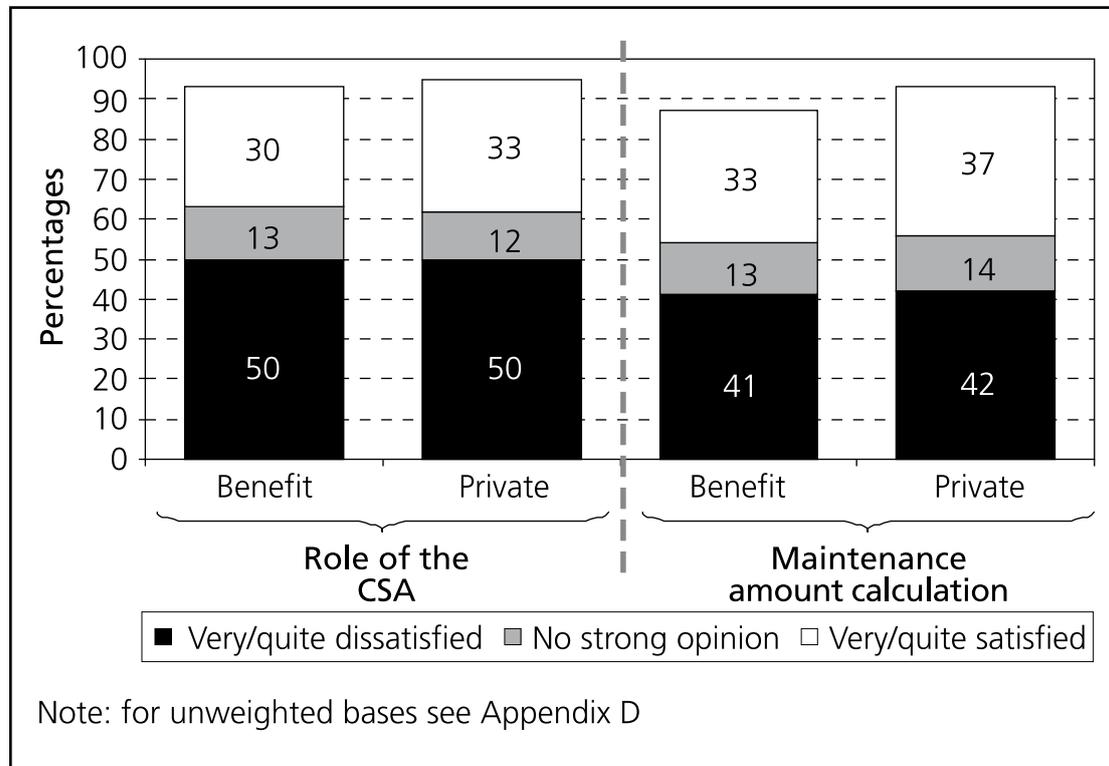
<sup>135</sup> On average, 88 per cent of benefit clients consider relationship attributes to be important compared to 93 per cent of non-benefit clients; 89 per cent of benefit clients consider communication attributes to be important compared to 93 per cent of non-benefit clients; and 90 per cent of benefit clients consider expertise attributes to be important compared to 94 per cent of non-benefit clients.

With regard to views on their relationship with the CSA, communication between themselves and the CSA and expertise of CSA employees, benefit intake clients were more likely to agree that performance around these more intangible aspects of service was more positive than non-benefit intake clients, although this does not alter an overall relatively poor picture. Areas of particular note were around relationships, particularly with regard to perceptions of being open and honest where 61 per cent of non-benefit intake clients agreed, (compared to 53 per cent benefit intake clients), being treated with courtesy and respect (70 per cent of non-benefit intake clients agreed compared to 64 per cent benefit intake clients) and being sensitive to client needs where 54 per cent of non-benefit intake clients agreed in comparison to 48 per cent of benefit intake clients. Half of all non-benefit intake clients considered CSA employees to display a good knowledge about the child maintenance process and that CSA employees provided information needed on how the process worked – these comparatively higher proportions perhaps help explain the higher levels of reported understanding of the maintenance calculation noted earlier.

### **11.5.3 Overall satisfaction**

In line with earlier analysis, a greater proportion of clients expressed dissatisfaction with the CSA's role in managing child maintenance arrangements than with the maintenance amount calculated (Figure 11.8). There is no difference in overall satisfaction levels across both metrics when these two sub-groups are compared. This finding is further reflected in considering views expressed regarding the fairness, affordability, personalisation and adequacy of contributions towards child support. Both benefit intake and non-benefit intake groups agreed that maintenance amounts are unfair, not affordable, do not take account of individual circumstances (personalisation) and are not an adequate contribution towards the costs of child support. Agreement/disagreement levels across the two groups are similar.

**Figure 11.8 Overall satisfaction – comparing views across relationship segments**



## 11.6 Summary

Analysis of the importance and performance ratings for service delivery highlighted limited instances of differences in benefit intake and non-benefit intake clients, and there is no clear pattern with regard to one client group being consistently more satisfied than the other. This suggests that intake type (status as benefit intake/non-benefit intake) is not a strong driver of differentiation in opinion with regard to views expressed on service delivery.

Importance ratings from these two groups on communication with the CSA, expertise of CSA employees and relationship with the CSA suggest that while client expectations are high, non-benefit intake clients may have higher expectations than benefit intake clients. This may be due to the fact that non-benefit intake clients may have chosen to use the CSA, which may have raised their expectations of the service they would receive. Following the pattern of analysis of the other sub-groups, a higher proportion of clients were more dissatisfied with the CSA's role in managing maintenance arrangements than with the maintenance amount calculated.



# 12 Conclusions

## 12.1 Introduction

This chapter reflects on the findings presented in the main body of the report and draws out key themes arising from the research and their implications. The discussions that follow focus on the following issues:

- service delivery going forward;
- managing universally high client expectations;
- understanding the implications of the client profile for Child Support Agency (CSA) service delivery;
- the position of non-resident parents (NRPs) and parents with care (PWCs) as CSA clients; and
- engaging with clients.

## 12.2 Service delivery going forward

With a focus on service delivery going forward, the client view across the qualitative and quantitative research is consistent. Clients' perceptions of poor performance are broadly around accuracy of actions/activities, keeping clients informed of progress (and thus making the organisation more accessible) and responsiveness in relation to service delivery and queries raised.

Table 12.1 illustrates these issues framed relevant to the context of specific aspects of service delivery tested in the survey. Therefore, it is indicating, across the various elements of service delivery, where there is commonly recorded poor performance. As the issues presented are consistently strongly correlated with performance and satisfaction, these are indicative areas that may need addressing in order to improve clients' experience and their satisfaction overall.

**Table 12.1 Common service delivery themes for future action**

	Keeping clients informed	Accuracy	Timing/ responsiveness
Application and assessment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Case maintenance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Change of circumstances	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Enforcement		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Complaints	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Interaction with CSA	<input type="checkbox"/>		

### 12.3 Managing universally high client expectations

It is evident from the research that all aspects of service are important to clients – the average ‘importance scores’ for each aspect of CSA service fell within a tight range of 4.4 to 4.9 (out of 5, where 5 was ‘extremely important’). Performance was largely rated as being poor – around one-half of CSA clients who had had contact with the Agency in the 12 months prior to the survey (approximately May 2006 to May 2007), explicitly stated that they felt the CSA had not performed well across a wide range of service delivery aspects. This was reflected in clients’ average rating of the CSA’s performance, which was 2.7 out of 5.

This survey suggests that the CSA seems to be falling short of client expectations across the board. However, there are pockets of performance where the Agency is coming relatively closer to meeting client expectations and this provides insight into better practice within the Agency. For example, the gap between importance and performance<sup>136</sup> is relatively smaller with regard to:

- treating information provided with care;
- organising suitable payment schedules and ensuring payments are timely;
- treating clients with courtesy and respect; and
- having suitable channels and times for contact by the client.

These are the more positive employee and systems messages. Extending and embedding these examples of positive performance across the Agency’s people and systems will help the Agency meet expectations.

When considering how best to manage high client expectations, it is important to bear in mind that both the qualitative and quantitative components of this

<sup>136</sup> CSA clients were asked ‘how important’ a statement was and ‘to what extent they agreed that they had received it’. Both of these scales were based on client’s perception and are not directly comparable, however the ‘gap’ between the importance and performance was explored to indicate where performance was low against high client priorities.

research show that all clients are in need of careful and sensitive handling due to the extremely emotional nature of this part of their life experience. Arranging child maintenance is part of the client's relationship breakdown journey. Clients come to the CSA at a difficult stage in their lives and recognition of this fact and the implementation of strategies for the managing of expectations, with regard to the role and remit of the Agency within this context, may also help manage these high expectations.

## 12.4 Understanding the implications of the client profile for CSA service delivery

This research programme took the opportunity to expand understanding of the personal context within which the CSA is delivering its service, i.e. the client's previous and current relationships status, child contact, existence of a new relationship and additional children from the new relationship. Of particular relevance are the findings regarding current relationship status and child contact.

The data generated from the survey on these two factors indicates that the CSA is operating within an environment where half of the client base have a generally poor current relationship with their ex-partner and just under a third have no contact with the child. Not surprisingly, analysis of the data shows that those with poorer relationships, and infrequent or no child contact, generally rate their experience of the CSA more negatively than those with better relationships and more frequent child contact. In particular, these two groups consistently rated the CSA's performance on application and assessment comparatively lower, and expressed particular dissatisfaction with the accuracy of the maintenance amount calculated. Further, the majority of those who have made a formal complaint<sup>137</sup> and the majority of those who are in arrears<sup>138</sup> (debt enforcement service clients) have a generally poor relationship with the other parent. The majority of debt enforcement clients also had infrequent<sup>139</sup> or no contact with the child<sup>140</sup>. This gives a clear indication that current relationship status and contact with the child are risk factors impacting on wider CSA service delivery and client handling. It is quite likely that these factors, perhaps make for a more complex case, which in turn may affect case management, for example, the personal context of these clients may delay assessments or lead to requests for reassessment which in turn may adversely affect NRP and PWC perspectives on timing and accuracy of application and assessment processes.

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<sup>137</sup> Sixty-eight per cent.

<sup>138</sup> Sixty-one per cent.

<sup>139</sup> Twenty-one per cent.

<sup>140</sup> Forty per cent.

However, profile characteristics in themselves do not provide the full explanation for the generally poor client experiences reported in this survey<sup>141</sup>. The correlation analysis conducted to explore the relationship between satisfaction with each aspect of CSA service delivery<sup>142</sup> and the individual attributes of each aspect of service<sup>143</sup> show that there are strong relationships between how the service is provided and the clients' expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service. This suggests that how the service is delivered is a significant factor in shaping overall views of the service<sup>144</sup>. This is substantiated by findings resulting from probing on reasons for satisfaction – those who were satisfied were so because, 'they had had no problems with the CSA', employees were helpful, polite and honest and the service was prompt. These reasons do not refer to maintenance amounts or context factors but are focused squarely on service provision issues.

The implications of these findings are that there is a body of clients whose difficult personal context may in some way influence negative perceptions of the Agency and there will inevitably be high risk cases. However, some of those with difficult personal circumstances are also satisfied with the Agency, both with specific aspects of service and overall. This suggests that potentially more high risk cases can be managed to produce a more positive experience for the client. This, linked to the fact that better service delivery is strongly related to a positive overall experience, suggests that improvements in service can yield a more positive client experience overall.

## 12.5 The position of non-resident parents and parents with care as Child Support Agency clients

The results of the analysis of sub-groups within the client base suggests that there are client segments whose views vary in comparison with the overall view, and when compared to their counterparts; for example, those with good current or past relationships with the other parent compared to those with poor current relationships and so on. The most striking of all of these are the variations between NRPs and PWCs. Throughout the report there have been examples of where, in relation to different elements of CSA service (whether it be delivery,

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<sup>141</sup> Some clients with no child contact and a poor relationship with the other parent were satisfied with the service.

<sup>142</sup> Application and assessment, case maintenance, changes in circumstances, enforcement and complaints.

<sup>143</sup> For example, the attributes relating to application and assessment are accuracy, timeliness, understanding, treating information with care and informing clients about progress.

<sup>144</sup> This is also true of the enforcement and complaints aspects of service. Dealing with both arrears and complaints in a timely manner are strongly correlated with satisfaction with these parts of the service – in the case of enforcement more so than calculating arrears correctly.

communication, client relationship skills or expertise), NRPs and PWCs have agreed or disagreed to differing and often significant levels. Although at the simplest level the CSA provides a service to manage child maintenance payments across the board, the way in which the service needs to engage with PWCs and NRPs is different. That is because the Agency is providing the service to the NRP as a payer of child maintenance, and the PWC as a receiver of child maintenance. Managing child maintenance arrangements ultimately means managing the flow of money from the NRP to the PWC, and these differing relationships with the Agency could account for some of the reported variations in perceived performance and satisfaction. It remains, though, that when the results are considered at a general level, regardless of NRP/PWC service position, the reported expectations of both roles in the child maintenance arrangement are still high, and generally both have experiences which are less than positive.

There are, however, subtle differences in the views expressed throughout the research programme which suggest that the perspectives of NRPs and PWCs, are based on their position with regard to child maintenance (giver or receiver). The main concerns of PWCs were noted to be payments, the maintenance thereof and addressing arrears. Conversely, key issues among NRPs were focused on the accuracy of payments and dealing with changes in circumstances. In particular, NRPs perceive themselves to have a poor relationship with the CSA especially around being treated with courtesy and respect and the CSA having more sensitivity to their needs. Further, NRPs have comparatively more difficulties in getting in touch with the CSA and communication materials appear to be more difficult for NRPs to understand than PWCs, specifically, NRPs found letters and leaflets more difficult to understand than PWCs. Overall, PWCs are more satisfied than NRPs.

These differences suggest that the status as an NRP or PWC does affect the expectation and views of service provision. The service received by NRPs and PWCs is more complex to the client than simply the management of child maintenance. NRPs are often perceived (by themselves and others) as the source of funds and PWCs as the seekers of child maintenance. Any difficulties in the process are inevitably traced back to the NRP. Therefore, the research provides evidence that better ways of engaging with NRPs are required, specifically in communicating more clearly and appropriately with NRPs and being more sensitive to their position and needs.

## 12.6 Engaging with clients

While the research shows that clients can contact the Agency using a method and at a time that is suitable for them, the research on the whole also shows that the CSA is not engaged with its client base. This was raised both in the qualitative and quantitative research. Focus group participants often described the CSA as a remote service with accessibility issues particularly around getting information and dealing with requests. This type of responsiveness was also an issue raised in the survey. While clients can contact the Agency at a time and in a way that suits them,

there are issues around keeping clients informed when a query has been logged or when the CSA is taking an action on their behalf. The challenge for the CSA in engaging with clients is more about being proactive, responding to its client base and informing clients of what it is doing for them, where appropriate.

Work is needed to bring the CSA closer to its clients. This issue is linked to the CSA's challenge in managing high expectations in that any work done to properly engage with clients in service delivery should impact positively on managing these expectations. For example, if appropriate and effective work is carried out with NRPs to improve communications and as a result their understanding of the role of the CSA and NRP and PWC responsibilities within that, this should help manage expectations regarding payments.

The CSA commissioned this research on its clients' experience to understand the issues that clients would like to improve, and to give the Agency a baseline measure of satisfaction ratings upon which to measure improvements. This is the first time in the history of the Agency that a detailed quantifiable client satisfaction survey has been conducted and demonstrates the Agency's focus on improving client service. This improved understanding of its clients and their issues, provides an important mechanism through which the Agency can engage its clients better in the future. It will also help to ensure that an understanding of what is important to clients is part of firstly, the changes that the CSA Operational Improvement Plan (OIP) is delivering into the business and secondly, the large-scale policy reform that the new Commission will address.

Indeed, as outlined at the outset, the early evidence suggests that many of the challenges highlighted by clients in this research have already begun to be accounted for and addressed through various OIP initiatives and the creation of Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (C-MEC).

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