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Policy paper

2010 to 2015 government policy: child maintenance reform

Updated 8 May 2015

Contents

Issue

Actions

Improving the collection of maintenance and arrears

Help and support for separated families

Who we've consulted

Background

Appendix 1: help and support for separated families

[↑ Contents](#)

This is a copy of a document that stated a policy of the 2010 to 2015 Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government.

The previous URL of this page was

<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-the-child-maintenance-system>. Current policies can be found at the GOV.UK [policies list](#).

Issue

Unstable family environments can negatively affect children's development and their future life chances. It is estimated that relationship breakdown and its associated impact on children costs our economy as much as £44 billion every year.

Evidence suggests that after a separation, children do best when their parents work together in the interests of their children. Making a family-based arrangement for child maintenance is one way they can do this.

The improvements planned by the government will help separated parents work together on the range of issues they face at separation, including arranging child maintenance. Child maintenance is regular, reliable financial support paid by one parent (the paying parent) to the other (the receiving parent) that helps towards a child's everyday living costs.

Actions

Closing Child Support Agency cases

We will close Child Support Agency (CSA) cases by the end of 2017. We will

ask parents to consider their options for their future child maintenance arrangements. This is to allow parents an opportunity to consider alternatives to using the Child Maintenance Service. Using this service incurs a cost to the applicant and, depending on arrangement type, could also incur ongoing collection and enforcement charges.

We will contact parents 6 months before their CSA case closes to allow them the opportunity to access the support services available to them. They will receive a reminder 1 month before their CSA case ends, and a confirmation once it has actually ended. We will not transfer cases automatically to the Child Maintenance Service. We will close them in a way that minimises the risk of disruption to child maintenance payments. Read more about [CSA case closure](#).

Introducing the Child Maintenance Service

The government has introduced a new statutory Child Maintenance Service for parents who are unable to make a family-based arrangement. It will bring speedier processing of applications, simpler calculations and faster enforcement action for those that choose not to pay. This will help increase the number of payments reaching children on time and in full and will result in a better use of taxpayers' money.

The government has also introduced fees for using the Child Maintenance Service. This is intended to encourage separated parents to work together in the best interests of their children and to remove the perception that using the Child Maintenance Service is the default option for separating parents.

Improving the collection of maintenance and arrears

We published the government's child maintenance arrears and compliance strategy 2012 to 2017 – [Preparing for the future, tackling the past](#) – on 31 January 2013. The strategy explains what the government will do to improve the collection of maintenance and arrears.

The actions will:

- improve the collection system
- prevent the build-up of arrears by encouraging more money paid in full and on time, every time
- increase the amount of arrears collected

Child Maintenance Options

The [Child Maintenance Options](#) service supports separated parents to make the child maintenance arrangement that best meets their needs. Child Maintenance Options will encourage parents to consider their options as opposed to automatically defaulting to the statutory scheme.

It provides tools and guidance and impartial information to enable parents to make a family-based arrangement – if it's appropriate and safe to do so. All new applicants must to speak to Child Maintenance Options before making an application to the Child Maintenance Service.

Help and support for separated families



The government is investing up to £14m in the Help and Support for Separated Families initiative (HSSF), to support couples and families to

work together when separating. One of the main aims is to minimise the impact of separation on children.

Who we've consulted

On 19 July 2012 we published a consultation about proposals for co-ordinating support services for separated and separating families – [‘Supporting separated families; securing children’s futures’](#). We published the government’s response to the consultation on the same page on 5 November 2013.

Background

We published a consultation about child maintenance, [‘Strengthening families, promoting parental responsibility: the future of child maintenance and the government’s response’](#), in 2011.

In 2006 we published Sir David Henshaw’s report [‘Recovering child support: routes to responsibility’](#)____. His recommendations included that:

- the state should only get involved when parents cannot come to an agreement themselves or when they try to evade their responsibilities
- parents who are able to should be encouraged and supported to make their own arrangements

Welfare reform communications toolkit

Our [welfare reform communications toolkit](#) helps explain how DWP is changing the welfare system. It covers:

- what we are changing
- why we are making the changes
- when we are making the changes

Appendix 1: help and support for separated families

This was a supporting detail page of the main policy document.

The Help and Support for Separated Families (HSSF) initiative aims to help, support and strengthen family life by:

- making it the norm for separated families to seek and understand what support and options are available to them
- enabling access to services that provide this support, especially for the most vulnerable

Sorting out Separation online service

The [Sorting out Separation](#) online service aims to help parents identify their needs and signpost them to trusted information, tools and specialist services. It also provides information on a range of separation issues such as mediation, health, housing, money, legal matters, relationships, children and parenting and work.

The Help and Support for Separated Families Mark

The [Help and Support for Families \(HSSF\) Mark](#) is awarded to organisations who demonstrate that their services meet a set of standards. The standards relate to the support the organisation provides for couples to:

- work together to resolve disputes – if it's appropriate and safe to do so
- concentrate on the interests of their children

Mark-holders include mediation providers, contact centres, and relationship support services.

The HSSF Innovation Fund



The government is spending up to £10 million of the HSSF investment on the Support for Separated Families Innovation Fund. Seventeen voluntary and private sector organisations have received funding to test and evaluate innovative interventions that help separated parents collaborate in the best interests of their children. We are not currently accepting new applications.

Help and Support for Separated Families – telephony training

An HSSF telephony training exercise has enabled 4 organisations to improve their telephony services for separated parents, with the emphasis on collaborative parenting. The exercise aims to ensure [that](#) separated families received reliable and consistent diagnosis and signposting. The training was provided by the Centre for Separated Families, to trainers from Family Lives,

National Youth Advocacy Service, Relate and Wikivorce. The training is now being rolled out to trainers in other organisations.

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[How government works](#)

[Departments](#)

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[Policies](#)

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