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Research and analysis

# Child maintenance calculation research summary

Published 4 June 2026

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## Research context

At the time of the research, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was considering reviewing the calculation underpinning statutory child maintenance (CM)

payments. The aim was to consider whether changes would better reflect the costs of raising children, address the affordability concerns of parents and improve fairness to children and their parents.

The research was commissioned by DWP to generate an understanding of how parents perceived the existing CM calculation (as it was in 2025). It also sought to explore how parents would respond to hypothetical changes to the calculation. Additionally, the study aimed to examine the possible impacts these hypothetical changes might have on compliance with CM payments, living standards and interparental behaviour to understand the service's effect on undesirable outcomes for parents and children. Finally, the research was designed to investigate issues related to shared care arrangements between parents.

The findings from this research contribute to the evidence on parents' experiences of the statutory child maintenance system.

## **Methodology**

The study involved both quantitative and qualitative research methods, which were carried out simultaneously between July and August 2025.

The quantitative research consisted of a total of 3,355 survey responses from 1,605 paying parents and 1,750 receiving parents. Fieldwork was conducted using a mixed-mode approach, with 2,863 interviews completed online and 492 conducted by telephone. The data was weighted to ensure that the achieved sample was representative of the overall population.

The qualitative research consisted of a total of 60 in-depth interviews with parents, including 34 with paying parents and 26 with receiving parents. Interviews were one hour in duration and conducted by telephone or Zoom. The interviews used stimuli with hypothetical financial circumstances and theoretical liability changes to gauge participant reactions and encourage reflection on the potential impacts of liability changes.

## **Overview of the research findings**

# **Factors shaping participants' views and reported behaviours**

The research identified a range of individual, social and material factors shaping participants' perceptions, reactions and CM-related behaviours. Individual factors included personal beliefs and experiences, such as feeling the payment amount was unfair. Social factors related to relationships and social expectations, including a sense of parental duty, interactions with the other parent, and shared care arrangements. Material factors were linked to financial circumstances, including affordability, reliance on CM, living costs, wider household responsibilities, and the impact of payments on personal finances (for example, income regularity).

## **Interparental dynamics**

The research findings highlighted the often-tense nature of relationships between parents using the Child Maintenance Service (CMS). The quantitative data indicated that tension levels were linked to both the paying parent's income and levels of communication between parents. Tension towards the other parent (as measured by 6 survey questions based on the Parental Acrimony Scale (PAS-25)) was highest from paying parents with larger incomes. Tension for receiving parents was highest where the paying parent's income was lower. Furthermore, although communication between surveyed parents was generally infrequent, less frequent communication was strongly associated with greater tension for paying and receiving parents.

Across the qualitative sample, parents with cooperative relationships tended to be more content with CM arrangements and liability, and these parents were less likely to view a liability change as a risk to the interparental relationship. Participants with poor or no relationship with the other parent tended to express mistrust and resentment. As such, the qualitative research identified trauma from separation as a key factor underpinning both paying and receiving parents' perceptions of the CM arrangement and liability. This also impacted on willingness to pay amongst some paying parents and suggests that intentional non-compliance may be associated with resentment towards the other parent.

## **Understanding and perceptions of the existing**

## calculation and liabilities

Understanding of the existing CM calculation was often limited or partial amongst the qualitative sample. The research identified that the information provided by the CMS was not always read or understood and that participants felt that the explanation of the calculation lacked clarity. Together, this led to confusion and distrust of the other parent amongst participants in the qualitative sample. Furthermore, a perceived lack of transparency regarding the details of the calculation led to perceptions of unfairness, as well as feelings of resentment about the liability.

These qualitative insights provided useful context for interpreting the quantitative findings, which also revealed wide variation in paying parents' understanding of how CM payments were affected by changes in earnings. Similar proportions said they either fully understood, had a good understanding or had limited understanding of how changes to income would impact their payments. Levels of understanding tended to be higher amongst paying parents who were paying via direct pay (DP) rather than collect and pay (C&P).

The research shows that many paying and receiving parents viewed their current CM liabilities as unfair, although there was variation in perceived fairness across different parent groups. The quantitative data shows that nearly half of both paying and receiving parents felt the amount they currently paid or received was very unfair. However, perceived fairness varied by the paying parent's income band. Receiving parents in the lowest income bands (nil, flat, and reduced) were most likely to feel that payments were unfair, whereas paying parents in the highest income bands (basic and basic plus) were most likely to feel they were unfair. Receiving parents largely attributed unfairness to underreporting of income or a perception that the paying parent can afford to pay more. In contrast, paying parents primarily cited affordability issues and the failure of the calculation to account for other support they provided.

Building on these insights the qualitative findings also outlined that participants felt that the range of factors underpinning the calculation was too narrow. Some receiving parents felt that the calculation should account for children's ages and should not rely on declared taxable income where the paying parent was self-employed. Paying parents generally felt that the calculation ought to factor in both parents' financial responsibilities and circumstances.

The quantitative findings highlighted that perceptions of the calculation being unfair also tended to correlate with no or equal shared care between parents and higher levels of conflict. In general, this was the case for both paying and receiving parents. However, it was more complex for paying parents when examining the links between

fairness perceptions, conflict and shared care. Tension reported by receiving and paying parents tended to decrease as shared care increased from no shared care to 2 nights per week. However, beyond 2 nights of shared care per week, where there were equal nights of shared care per week, tension tended to be stronger; most likely because parents were unhappy with the balance of care and financial contributions. These findings were also reflected in the qualitative findings, which suggested that this may be because paying parents with shared care felt the extent of their responsibilities were not fully recognised financially.

The qualitative research findings illustrated that reduced and flat rate liabilities were widely regarded as insufficient for children's needs. Yet basic and basic plus rate liabilities were sometimes perceived as excessive by paying parents.

Several key factors were identified as shaping participants' satisfaction with their existing CM arrangements, including:

- social values
- the quality of the interparental relationship
- the perceived fairness of the calculation or liability
- perceptions of affordability and adequacy of the liability

Importantly, receiving parents were found to equate fairness with the adequacy of payments to meet the needs of the children, the costs of raising the children and the extent of their caring responsibilities. Amongst paying parents, fairness was found to be gauged by perceived affordability and, again, the extent of their caring responsibilities. The quantitative data also suggests that perceived fairness was in-part relational, with parents in high-conflict situations being more likely to feel the calculation was unfair, regardless of liability.

## **Insights on shared care**

The research explored shared care arrangements, where paying parents receive a CM reduction for each night of the week that their children stay with them. This was to better understand the actual variation in care beyond the overnight stays officially counted by the CMS. Nearly two-thirds of receiving parents and just over a third of paying parents reported that non-financial care was not provided by the paying parent. Where it was provided, this type of care varied across parent groups but was most often limited to one or two nights per week. Amongst parents that said the

other parent provides overnight care, approximately 1 in 5 receiving parents reported that the paying parent provided less than one night per week, a smaller proportion of both parent groups reported three or more nights. Some parents had formal or informal agreements about non-financial aspects of care, the majority had no such agreements in place.

A key finding was the divergence in care levels reported by receiving and paying parents. As a group, paying parents consistently reported providing more overnight and daytime care than the receiving parents reported (as a group). In some cases, these differing perceptions extended to attempts to adjust care arrangements. Paying parents were more likely than receiving parents to say the paying parent had tried to increase the number of overnight stays. Paying parents were also more likely than receiving parents to say the receiving parent had tried to decrease the number of nights. As these findings come from 2 separate samples of receiving and paying parents rather than matched pairs, these differences should be interpreted as differences in perception rather than direct contradictions between 2 matched parents.

Attitudes toward adjusting care arrangements were strongly influenced by interwoven financial and relational factors. For instance, paying parents often reported seeking to increase overnight care to spend more time with their children, yet receiving parents frequently perceived this as an attempt to reduce the amount of CM paid. Conversely, receiving parents were more likely to report attempting to reduce overnight care due to concerns about the child's wellbeing, lack of support from the paying parent, or the child's own preferences. Paying parents often felt these concerns were financially motivated to increase the CM payment amount or represented a manipulation of care driven by relational issues. It is important to note that this research only reflects the stated perceptions and motivations of participants, and therefore it was not possible to fully validate parents' contrasting views.

Further analysis indicated that higher liability paying parents were more likely to report non-financial shared care than those with lower liabilities. This indicates that many higher income paying parents feel heavily engaged, with many providing both financial and non-financial support. Of course, liability level alone may not fully determine engagement or compliance, but rather relationship quality and shared care may be key mediating factors. This suggests that increasing liabilities among paying parents who are already providing substantial shared care may risk increasing perceived unfairness and frustration (particularly for those parents who feel care arrangements were not adequately reflected in the calculation).

Additionally, for both paying and receiving parents in DP there tended to be higher levels of non-financial shared care and lower levels of parental conflict, compared

with those in C&P. This finding may suggest that relational, as well as financial factors are key in understanding non-compliance. For example, there may be a complex two-way relationship between conflict and non-compliance.

However, the link between fairness perceptions and shared care was complex for paying parents. As mentioned above, the qualitative findings suggest that paying parents with shared care may be more likely to view the calculation as unfair because they feel the extent of their responsibilities are not fully recognised financially.

## **Reactions to hypothetical liability changes**

Participant reactions to the tested hypothetical changes varied substantially between paying and receiving parents and by rate. Receiving parents tended to respond more consistently, with particular concerns about maintaining adequate support for children if liabilities were decreased. Paying parents' responses varied with financial security and perceived fairness and adequacy of the liability. Paying parents with greater financial insecurity tended to have stronger reactions to hypothetical liability increases or decreases. Paying parents on the basic and basic plus rates with a degree of financial security tended to question the fairness of theoretical liability increases.

Generally, paying and receiving parents' reactions to, and perceived impacts of, liability changes tended to be opposing, reflecting the binary dynamic of liability increases or decreases. For example, increased CM payments were broadly received positively by receiving parents, but negatively by paying parents. Parents across the sample also highlighted that changes to CM liabilities may strain the interparental relationship and communications with the other parent.

The qualitative research identified that perceptions of affordability and adequacy, alongside shared social values, influenced participants' reactions to theoretical liability changes. For example, participants who reported financial insecurity, expressed stronger negative impacts of theoretical changes to CM liabilities. Participants' shared values regarding parental responsibilities informed parents' reactions to the hypothetical liability changes. Receiving parents expressed negative reactions to the hypothetical liability decreases, as a reduction was seen to lessen the other parents' responsibilities. Theoretical higher rate liability increases were often met with strong resistance and reluctance to pay amongst paying parents, because the arrangement was perceived to be unfair.

Table 1 summarises participants' reactions to the tested hypothetical liability changes.

	<b>Flat rate increase</b>	<b>Reduced rate (decrease)</b>	<b>Basic rate &lt;£350 (decrease)</b>	<b>Basic rate (increase)</b>
Receiving parents	<b>Dismissive.</b> Makes little difference – amount remains insufficient to support children. May be meaningful to very low-income families.	<b>Concern.</b> Already too low – a decrease was felt to be unfair and even insulting. However, some acknowledged it was fair in the context of the paying parent's earning. Reactions increased in intensity with number of children.	<b>Unethical.</b> A decrease would be unfair – cost of raising children not decreasing – and unethical given its potential impacts. Questioned the need for a reduction.	<b>Welcoming.</b> Lower income receiving parents welcomed increase felt fair and 'a step in the right direction'. Some acknowledged it was hard if it was fair paying parents
Paying parents	<b>Ambivalence.</b> Mixed reactions, reflecting views about fairness/affordability. Some saw it as burdensome, others as justified by inflation, with willingness to pay hinging on trust it would benefit the children.	<b>Concern/dismissal.</b> Mixed reactions. Some felt it was unfair to reduce the payment. For others it was more affordable and welcomed the reduction. Others felt the change was not enough to raise concern.	<b>Concern.</b> Paying parents expressed concern at reducing the rate and taking money away from the receiving parents and the children. They noted	<b>Disproportionate.</b> Paying parents felt that an increase would be unfair and more than they would be receiving. Questioned the need for the increase and what the increase was for the children.

that the reduction was not felt to be significant enough to have benefits to them.

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## **Table 1: an overview of participants' reactions to hypothetical changes in liabilities**

### **Reactions to hypothetical decreases to liabilities**

Overall, in the qualitative research, the tested hypothetical decreases in CM liabilities received a mixed response from paying parents, although those with shared care were more welcoming of a decrease and cited being able to spend more on the children when in their care. However, decreased liabilities were generally received negatively by receiving parents. Both paying and receiving parents felt that decreased liabilities were likely to have a negative impact on children's welfare and wellbeing.

Hypothetical decreases to liabilities for those on the reduced rate cause concern amongst receiving parents who felt that the reduced rate was already too low. Furthermore, receiving parents on the reduced and basic rates felt that a decrease was unfair and unethical, given the costs of raising children.

Paying parents on the reduced rate expressed a mix of concern, dismissal and welcome regarding a theoretical decrease to liabilities. Some paying parents felt it would be unethical, and others felt the tested hypothetical decrease would make CM payments more affordable. Similarly, paying parents on the basic rate (earning less than £350 per week) tended to express concern that a decrease in liability might take money away from the receiving parent and their children, whilst providing little to no benefit to them as the paying parent.

## **Reactions to hypothetical liability increases**

Hypothetical increases to CM liabilities received a mixed response from paying parents. Generally, paying parents were not keen to see liability increases for a range of reasons. The quantitative data also highlighted that the majority of paying parents in the flat rate band (68%) felt that the liability should not change. In the qualitative research, the majority presented with a hypothetical liability increase on the flat rate expressed concern that an increase would be difficult to manage and would drive financial strain. Paying parents on the basic plus rate generally felt that the theoretical increase to liability was excessive and unreasonable. Despite a broad reluctance towards hypothetical liability increases, paying parents felt it was their obligation to pay what was required. However, paying parents' willingness to pay often hinged on trust between the parents or evidence that an increased payment would benefit the children.

Receiving parents were welcoming of impactful increases, but responses were muted where increases were seen to be nominal. In the quantitative survey, nearly 9 in 10 (87%) receiving parents said the flat rate should be increased above £7 per week, however, in the qualitative sample, the presented increase to liability for the flat rate was seen to be insignificant and evoked criticism amongst some receiving parents.

## **Perceived impacts of hypothetical liability changes**

Perceptions of the potential impacts of the tested liability changes were highly consistent across the basic and basic plus rates, though opposing for each parent type. Paying parents' perceptions of the hypothetical flat rate increase in the qualitative research were mixed, but paying parents on the flat rate broadly reported a view that an increase to the liability would likely add to their financial struggle and stress. The hypothetical flat rate increase was seen to have little impact for the receiving parents. The more substantial hypothetical increases to liabilities tested with parents on the basic and basic plus rates were seen to drive likely financial stress for paying parents whilst offering significant improvements for basic rate receiving parents' household budgets. Tested decreases in liabilities for reduced and basic rate parents were generally seen to moderately undermine household budgets for receiving parents', with possible knock-on effects for the children and employment. Amongst paying parents, these hypothetical decreases were seen to

be likely to ease paying parents' financial burden, offering (for some) significant improvements to their quality of life. Parents across the qualitative sample highlighted that changes to liabilities were likely to cause friction in their relationship with the other parent.

Table 2 summarises research participants' perceived potential impacts of the tested hypothetical liability changes.

	<b>Flat rate increase</b>	<b>Reduced rate (decrease)</b>	<b>Basic rate &lt; £350 (decrease)</b>	<b>Basic rate &gt; £350 (increase)</b>	<b>Basic plus rate (increase)</b>
Receiving parents	<b>No impact.</b> The increase would have no impact as it is insufficient to contribute to the cost of raising children in a meaningful or significant way.	<b>Further budgeting.</b> A decrease would mean thinking about what and where to spend money. For example, rethinking household spending. This would include food and childcare – impacting children's health and employment.	<b>Challenging.</b> A decrease would be challenging and would require a reconfiguration of household spending – which would impact the whole household (specially activities for the children).	<b>Significant impact.</b> The increase would have a significant impact – would improve children's quality of life, provide financial security and allow for childcare (opening employment), However, may impact paying parent compliance and relationship with children and receiving parents.	(impacts increase in perceived intensity number children)
Paying parents	<b>Added burden.</b> The	<b>Ease burden.</b> A decrease	<b>Improved quality of life.</b> A decrease	<b>Increased disadvantage.</b> An increase	<b>Serious impacts.</b> Would

increase, though not much, would add to the paying parent's financial struggle and stress. They would need to re-evaluate what they can afford and cut back on basics, and they may need to seek support.	would ease financial burden and make the payment more affordable. However, is likely to have negative impact for the children (where there is no shared care) and on the relationships with the other parent.	would not only be more affordable, but it would mean a better quality of life for the paying parent and would allow more activities with their children when they have care.	would 'further disadvantage the paying parent' – would have serious financial impacts and would push them into financial distress. Would cause significant amount of distress and impact mental health.	undermine household financial security, quality of life (inc. other children paying parent household and pay parent mental health). Would consider ways to reduce taxable income.
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**Table 2: an overview of participants' perceived impacts of hypothetical changes in liabilities**

## Perceived impacts of hypothetical liability decreases

The quantitative research also explored the potential impact of reducing CM payments on both paying and receiving parents. Amongst paying parents who reported difficulty making payments, most felt that even substantial reductions would not make paying consistently easier. In contrast, most receiving parents said any reduction would cause them financial hardship, highlighting the reliance of many households on this income. Across both paying and receiving parents, hypothetical liability changes rarely aligned with self-reported tolerance levels for decreases in payments.

The qualitative research found that the receiving parents who were interviewed generally felt that a decrease to the liabilities for those currently in the reduced rate would have a moderate impact on their household budget. Receiving parents on the basic rate reported that a decrease to the liability could lead to challenging financial circumstances which would impact the whole household. In both cases, participants suggested that a reduction to the household budget may, in turn, have implications for the children, their wellbeing and possibly the receiving parents' employment.

Amongst paying parents on the reduced rate, the tested hypothetical decrease to the liability was seen to have the potential to ease their financial burden, making the CM payment slightly more affordable. However, these participants also felt that the theoretical decrease was likely to have a negative impact on their children. Paying parents on the basic rate who were interviewed reported that the tested hypothetical decrease to the liability would not only be more affordable, but it would also offer significant improvements to their quality of life and for the children when they were in their care.

The research suggests that decreased liabilities may support paying parents by easing financial pressure, making the rates more affordable, and possibly increasing willingness to pay. As such, although there were multiple influencing factors driving compliance, liability reductions may work to improve non-entrenched non-compliance amongst paying parents who struggle financially.

## **Perceived impacts of hypothetical liability increases**

The quantitative research also explored by how much CM payments might be increased before affordability and compliance became more difficult for paying parents. Findings suggest that even modest increases in liability may make consistent payment challenging for many paying parents, particularly those in higher income bands. However, some paying parents reported that they might be able to cope with larger increases. This was most common among those with lower current liabilities. Overall, the findings suggest that even relatively small changes to CM payment levels may impact perceived affordability and the ability of some paying parents to remain compliant.

In the qualitative strand, both receiving and paying parents on the flat rate felt the hypothetical increase was insignificant and would have no meaningful impact for the receiving parent. The perceived impacts of the hypothetical increase to liabilities amongst flat rate paying parents varied. However, flat rate paying parents reported

that even a small increase to the liability would be challenging, and that larger increases would exacerbate financial pressures. Receiving parents in the basic rate felt that the hypothetical increase to the CM liability had the potential for significant positive impacts, including for their children's quality of life and for undertaking employment or taking on more work. However, paying parents on the basic and basic plus rates felt that an increase to the liability would have serious financial impacts for their households and this would significantly undermine their mental health.

Crucially, participants also suggested that an increase to liabilities would encourage paying parents on the basic and basic plus rates to find ways to reduce their taxable income. The research highlighted that willingness to pay was undermined in paying parents who perceived the hypothetical liability increase as unfairly excessive.

## **Insights on (non-)compliance behaviour**

Analysis indicates a complex relationship between liability, shared care, conflict, and compliance. Four key drivers of compliance were identified by the research:

- perceived duty or responsibility
- conflict avoidance
- access to the children
- affordability of the liability

The primary drivers of non-compliance identified were unwillingness to pay and unaffordability, whilst the data suggests that intentional non-compliance may be associated with conflict and resentment towards the receiving parent.

The prevailing view amongst paying parents was that CM payments were a core parental duty, and should be paid even if burdensome (in part to avoid conflict). However, paying parents with lower incomes or financial insecurity were likely to be at higher risk of non-compliance on account of affordability, particularly if liabilities were to increase beyond their means. Furthermore, receiving parents reported that liability reductions were unlikely to change non-compliance unrelated to affordability.

The qualitative data also suggested that compliance was reinforced by having shared care arrangements, access or contact with the children, and a desire to maintain or improve current arrangements. Yet the findings also highlight that paying

parents with shared care or daytime caring responsibilities often perceived liabilities to be unfair. Many felt that they do not account for the extent of their caring responsibilities and undermine their financial capacity to provide when the children are in their care.

Reflecting on these drivers, the data also suggests that CMS communication is important to minimise interparental conflict that may result from liability changes. Furthermore, the provision of more detailed information regarding the calculation may improve perceptions of fairness and willingness to pay amongst paying parents.

Finally, the data indicates that intentional non-compliance may be associated with resentment towards the receiving parent. As such, liability reductions alone are unlikely to significantly reduce this type of non-compliant paying parent behaviour.

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