



Equal Parenting Alliance Party
A New Child Support System

Is Money Enough?

March 2007

Our response to December 2006 white paper
A New System of Child Maintenance

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Executive Summary

This document is the Equal Parenting Alliance's formal response to the government's proposals in their white paper *A New System of Child Maintenance, December 2006* for a new system of child support to replace the Child Support Agency.

1. It is generally agreed that the CSA was a failure.
2. We are concerned the reasons for the failure will not be understood by the government which – without acknowledging the real reasons – is destined to repeat the same mistakes again.
3. We have designed our proposals from the outset to benefit children who live apart from one of their parents. All the evidence suggests that children are better off – and have more successful lives as adults – if they have a good relationship with both their parents, even after separation.
4. We believe the first question that should be asked when replacing the CSA is “How can we help the children of separated parents maintain an effective parental relationship with their separated parent?”.
5. The CSA unintentionally promotes almost the exact opposite – by encouraging resident parents to block separated parents from parenting their children.
6. We believe, that by concentrating only on collecting as much money as possible, involvement of the CSA leads to unintended and harmful side-effects for children. These effects will continue – and possibly be made even worse – by the proposals in this white paper.
7. The essence of our proposals is that a simple flat-rate monthly payment by non-resident parents replaces the existing complex bureaucracy of the CSA.
8. We believe the side-effects of our proposals would be a reduction in conflict between parents – and improved co-operation as they would be encouraged to share their parental roles more equally.
9. Reducing conflict between separated parents is not just a *nice-to-have* feature of our plan – it is a key outcome – and would benefit children far more profoundly than arbitrarily taking money from one parent.

By equating parenting solely with the transfer of money, the government are showing they know the price of everything but the value of nothing.

Our proposals would replace the CSA with a system that is simpler, fairer, harder to evade, cheaper to implement and – most importantly – *better* for the children it should be designed to benefit.



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PROLOGUE

Whatever the first letter that drops through the letterbox from the CSA actually says, this is probably the letter that the recipient is going to read

Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
London
SW1H 9DA

Dear Mrs X,

Your child has been removed from your care, without notice and through no fault of your own.

However, you are required by law to fulfil your responsibilities towards your child, so please remit £45.26 to me weekly from now on.

Failure to do so will cause me to remove your passport and driving license. I will also be pleased to publicly humiliate you and your child by naming and shaming you on a website for absent parents.

Of course, should you wish to see your child again, you have the right to make an application for contact through the courts. But please understand - we are not interested in whether your child ever sees you again - we just require you to pay.

Have a nice day.

Yours sincerely,

John Hutton

New Labour Secretary of State
Dept for Work & Pensions

... with an approach like this, is it any wonder the CSA failed? Sadly, it appears the government approach to its successor will be identical and will inevitably lead to the same conclusion.

It's the children who will lose out, just the same.



Introduction

It is generally accepted that both parents should be responsible for bringing up their children, even after they no longer live together. The Child Support Agency (CSA) is currently responsible for assessing and collecting payments of child support from non-resident parents.

However, the CSA has failed to meet its aims in almost every respect. Annually, the amount collected does not even meet the organisation's running costs, with a net cost to the taxpayer of about £200 million per year. Clearly this is a nonsense. It would have been cheaper to simply pay the resident parents out of the public purse and not have the CSA at all!

The CSA has been threatened with dissolution on several occasions though it has always survived, but in 2006 the government announced it was finally to be abolished. The government asked Sir David Henshaw to propose a replacement scheme and their white paper is based on his report. A public consultation on the white paper is due to end on the 13th March 2007.

This document is the Equal Parenting Alliance's formal response to the white paper *A New System of Child Maintenance, December 2006*.

In our view, the CSA was an opportunity missed.

Instead of taking a child-centred view and asking "How can we best improve the lives of children who do not live with one of their parents"; the government asked "How can we get the most money out of estranged parents and minimise the cost of lone-parenthood to the treasury?"

We believe this ultimate lack of 'vision' is the root cause behind the failure of the CSA, and is why its successor C-MEC (*the CSA Mark II*) will fail in just the same way.

As well as presenting our proposals, we try and analyse why the CSA failed in the first place and show how our proposals address these key failings.



Why the CSA failed

Essential to Understand Why

The CSA was a failure. In the simplest terms, it just wasn't very good at collecting money (its only function as designed).

Of course, there were some clear, and mostly undisputed problems within the organisation itself. Its administration costs were very high, it was burdened by a poor implementation of two separate computer systems handling claims and calculation methods, staff morale was bad and the rate of compliance by non-resident parents was reportedly low.

Unfortunately, the Government takes a very simplistic view of what went wrong and regard it as little more than a lack of enforcement. In their mind, the CSA was in an administrative mess and just couldn't concentrate hard enough on tough policies for extracting money from recalcitrant parents.

They blame the problems almost entirely on the 'absent' parents and seem unwilling to address or investigate the real reasons the CSA failed.

Whilst the proposed C-MEC quite rightly hopes to remove some parents from the system itself, their solution for the remaining parents relies entirely on their simplistic assumptions about why the CSA failed in the first place.

Our scheme recognises that the failures were as much due to human nature as to failures in legislation or CSA management. As we cannot redesign humans or realistically expect them to change, we have to design a scheme that will work with them.

Without a proper understanding of the reasons behind the failure of the CSA, the likelihood is exactly the same mistakes will simply be repeated – and new ones added.

Fundamental Errors in Approach

We think the CSA, and legislation behind it, was flawed in the way it defined and approached the problem of separated parents. Most fundamentally, the government made no attempt to devise a system providing maximum benefit to the children living apart from one of their parents.

Unfortunately, the thrust was *revenue-centred* rather than *child-centred*. The main priority being the recovery of money for the treasury.

By almost completely ignoring issues of contact between children and their estranged parents – whilst simultaneously implementing a system which virtually guaranteed an increase in conflict between parents – the government showed its true lack of concern for the welfare of children it claimed to support.



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Similarly, by adopting a purely punitive approach to the problem and treating all non-resident parents as stereotypical ‘dead beat dads’, the government alienated – at a stroke – almost all non-resident parents.

Absent Parents or Excluded Parents?

There is a huge difference between an *Absent* Parent – who makes no effort to play a part in the children’s lives; and an *Excluded* Parent – who wishes to play a proper part in the upbringing of the children, but is prevented from doing so by the resident parent.

Most people (ourselves included) regard truly absent parents with disdain and believe tough enforcement and penalties are appropriate (and deserved). However, tarring all with the same brush is insulting to the vast numbers of excluded parents who strive against a hostile and indifferent system to maintain some semblance of a relationship with their child.

Involvement of CSA Worsens Situation For Many Children

At the simplest level, by increasing the level of conflict between parents CSA involvement often makes the situation immediately worse for children. Few children benefit from increased conflicts between their parents.

Because of the way the assessment is calculated, it is the *excluding* parents who are rewarded financially. Parents who block overnight contact with non-resident parents increase their income, whilst those who co-operatively agree overnight contact are rewarded with a reduction in income.

We believe that financial rewarding such irresponsible resident parents is a fundamental failing of the CSA.

Similarly, the punitive and intrusive nature of the CSA provides a ready-made threat for resident parents to use against non-resident parents, “if you don’t do X then I’ll get the CSA onto you!” which only increases conflict.

More extremely, some non-resident parents leave their job or even make themselves unemployed because of the level of resentment they feel against the CSA. Similarly, some even break contact with their children altogether and go ‘underground’ to avoid payment. Whatever our views on these parents may be, it is hard to believe that the children concerned benefit from the loss of their parent.

By completely ignoring the benefit to children of a normal parental relationship with their non-resident parent, involvement of the CSA therefore can have the very bad side-effect of damaging this relationship for many children.

Punitive Approach for all Non-Resident Parents

Unfortunately, the government and CSA treat *all* non-resident parents with the contempt they probably should reserve for absent parents alone. Most reasonable people, on the other hand, realise absent and excluded parents are not morally equivalent.



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Despite a clear distinction between absent and excluded parents, statements from the government consistently refer to non-resident parents as 'absent' parents, and the emphasis is always on getting these 'irresponsible' parents to pay. They do not seem to realise – or care – how insulting their remarks are to excluded parents actively prevented from playing a responsible parental role for their children.

If the government condemned equally irresponsible resident parents who exclude a child's other parent without cause, then perhaps many of the problems the CSA deals with would simply evaporate.

When combined with a system of family law which – while paying lip service to a child's best interests – will do nothing whilst one parent eliminates the other, we have a system which facilitates the creation of excluded parents and then labels them as *irresponsible*.

It is hardly any wonder that many excluded parents resent paying the CSA after they see their removal from their children's lives having been sponsored by the state.

Approach is Revenue-Centred Rather than Child-Centred

The CSA was designed to extract the maximum amount of money from non-resident parents as possible. However, the way the legislation is designed, the money does not always even reach the child.

If the resident parent is receiving income support, then that income support amount is taken off money paid to the CSA before it is given to the resident parent. (The government's main priority is clearly recovering the income support payment from the non-resident parent). For example, if a resident parent receives £50 income support a week and the non-resident parent pays £60 a week into the CSA; then the resident parent will get just £10 from that CSA payment.

In these cases, *the CSA payment from the non-resident parent benefits the treasury rather than the child.*

Contact Issues Almost Completely Ignored

The CSA and legislation around it takes little account of the level of contact or involvement between the child and the non-resident parent. While, in an ideal world, this may be a sensible approach (as the child still needs to be maintained regardless of how much contact there is with the resident parent), in practice we see this is a major flaw in the design of the child support mechanism.

The approach taken by the CSA is to count the total number of overnight stays with the non-resident parent in a year, and for each whole 50 overnights the payment is reduced by one seventh.

This provides a financial incentive to the resident parent to oppose or limit the number of overnight stays allowed. Thus the resident parent is encouraged to oppose something which is usually going to be beneficial to the child and *therefore act against the child's best interests.*



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Daytime contact is also ignored. So, for example, a non-resident parent who cares for a child two days a week without overnights still incurs many of the costs of overnight stays but pays the same.

Lack of Fairness

There is no effort in the CSA (or its successor C-MEC) to be fair to non-resident parents.

For example, a non-resident parent who has a child for 3 whole days but only two overnights will still pay towards the CSA. The difference in cost between caring for a child for four and three days is negligible. It does not make any sense that the resident parent still gets an income from the non-resident parent.

In most cases the resident parent will also keep all the Child Benefit payment, so they could easily have a greater income than the non-resident parent despite sharing care almost equally!

Of course, many of the costs in caring for a child with overnights (extra bedroom space needed, clothing etc) are fixed in any case. It does not cost much more to care for a child for three nights a week than one night.

New partners for separated parents can always make things harder for the children of course. So why does the CSA make things worse between the parents by taking the non-resident parent new partner's income into account in the maintenance calculation, but ignoring the resident parent new partner's income?

It may seem petty to regard fairness as important. But without fairness, non-resident parents will resent paying and adopt strategies to reduce their liabilities. This is not in the child's best interests, and is a major reason why the CSA failed.



Conclusion – Why CSA Approach Failed

Failure to Set Appropriate Priorities

We believe the basic approach taken by the CSA and the government is fundamentally flawed. This is not chiefly due to inefficient administration or bad management of the CSA itself, but to fatal flaws in the initial priorities set for the organisation.

Failed Priorities of CSA

The prioritised aims of the existing CSA (and the government's proposals for the replacement C-MEC) were limited to:

1. Transfer of income from non-resident parent to treasury
2. Transfer of residual income from non-resident parent to resident parent

Issues of child welfare are completely ignored apart from the single task of extracting money from the non-resident parent. With such priorities at its core, it is hardly surprising that the CSA is an organisation almost entirely unfit for purpose.

Family Law Issues

Essentially, the framework of the CSA together with the family court's implementation of the Children Act 1989, invariably hands one parent (the *resident parent*) complete control and power over the other parent.

The non-resident parent has no power or opportunity to exercise their parental responsibility towards their child, unless the resident parent accepts it. The only chance a non-resident parent has to maintain a reasonable parental relationship with their child, is to acquiesce to every demand of the resident parent, whether reasonable or otherwise.

Of course – in the majority of cases – where the resident parent acts responsibly and in the interests of the child, this system works fine. Both parents can still play a shared and meaningful role in the parenting of their child.

Unfortunately – in a sizeable minority of cases – the resident parent will act against the child's best interests and exclude the child's other parent without good reason. We must ask why these irresponsible parents should be financed by the non-resident parent at all?

Fundamentally, the CSA is an integral part of a system that affords :

1. Resident parents with *rights* but no responsibilities; and
2. Non-resident parents with *responsibilities* but no rights.

Such inequity is a recipe for failure.



Response to White Paper

The Government's Only Answer

The government are fond of denouncing 'irresponsible' 'absent' parents who don't make payments to the CSA, indeed they take pride in their tough and uncompromising approach, saying they will "come down like a ton of bricks" on them, (*John Hutton, House of Commons 24 July 2006*). Even more recently, John Hutton announced their intention to *name and shame* non-paying absent parents on a public web-site.

Our Response

We welcome many features of the successor to the CSA (C-MEC) in the white paper and believe it would probably be an improvement on the current CSA – though mostly because more parents would be outside the remit of the new organisation completely.

However, apart from this, the overall emphasis is still the same as the current CSA. The plan exhibits the same lack of concern for the welfare of the children involved by concentrating completely on extracting money from the non-resident parents. By ignoring the chance to facilitate an improved relationship between children and their non-resident parent the new system will predictably repeat the same failure of the CSA.

Indeed the very name of the organisation, the *Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission*, panders to the politically correct notion that the only problem with the original CSA is that of enforcement.

The government would rather gain political capital and further alienate non-resident parents, than create a system designed to benefit children who's parents are separated.

So although *fewer* children's lives will probably be blighted by the involvement of the C-MEC than the current CSA, these children will probably be damaged *more* by a system even *more* determined to alienate their non-resident parent than the current system.

Does anyone truly believe that the only benefit a parent offers to a child is to pay towards their keep? Of course not. It is absurd.

It is equally absurd to make money the sole focus of any new strategy for Child Support.



Our Proposals

Getting the Best Outcome for Children

We believe the replacement for the CSA should be designed from the outset with the intention of improving the lives of children whose parents are separated. It is important to set appropriate priorities for the organisation.

Setting Correct Priorities

We propose the prioritised aims of the new organisation should be:

1. To encourage a co-operative parental relationship between separated parents
2. To improve or facilitate involvement in children's parenting by non-resident parents
3. To ensure payments are made by non-resident parent to resident parent

This is in stark contrast with the current CSA (and proposed scheme), which are designed only to extract funds from non-resident parents.

Essentially, we believe the lives of children would be improved more by involvement and a relationship with both their parents, than by the simple (and forced) arbitrary transfer of income from one parent to the other.

Designing a system from the outset to encourage co-operation between separated parents will bring immediate benefits to children. This contrasts the existing system which – by concentrating solely on collecting money from non-resident parents – frequently makes things worse for children by increasing conflict between parents.

Similarly, we believe that encouraging co-operation between parents will make it far more likely that the non-resident parent will successfully and meaningfully remain involved in the parenting of a child throughout childhood.

Although we agree a certain amount of financial contribution should be mandatory, we believe *more children will benefit by simply concentrating on reducing the level of conflict between separated parents.*

Child Support should be child-centred not revenue-centred.



Key Elements of Our Proposals

Designed to Benefit Children	From the outset we have designed this scheme to benefit children who do not live with one of their parents.
Flat Rate Payments	<p>Our scheme is based upon a simple flat-rate monthly payment.</p> <p>Everyone pays the same amount regardless of income, depending only on the number of children.</p> <p>There is no need for any assessment to determine the amount due.</p>
Deduction at Source	<p>Instead of a different agency separately assessing and collecting payments, we propose payments are collected by the Inland Revenue via modifications to the existing PAYE scheme or by direct deduction from benefits.</p> <p>This makes payments virtually automatic for most people and thus much harder to avoid.</p>
Payments via Child Benefit mechanism	<p>Payments from the scheme will be made via modifications to the existing Child Benefit payment mechanism.</p> <p>No need for another new payment bureaucracy.</p>
Encouragement of Additional Voluntary Payments	<p>By setting the flat rate at a level designed to encourage compliance, the parents will be encouraged to agree additional voluntary payments into the scheme.</p> <p>Voluntary payments are recorded to provide later accountability to child.</p>
Mediation	<p>Both parents will be encouraged to attend mediation sessions to agree how they are going to manage financial planning for the children.</p> <p>One mediation session a year will be provided free of charge to encourage attendance.</p>
Accountability to Child (not the state)	<p>All payments are recorded and, when the child reaches 18, the records are passed to the child (by then an adult of course). It will be apparent who has been paying.</p> <p>The parents will thereby be directly accountable to their child for payments.</p>



Proposed Scheme in Detail

Overview

We propose the complex and controversial assessments of the CSA are replaced by a simple, flat-rate weekly payment by non-resident parents.

The amount paid by a non-resident parent would depend solely on the number of children concerned. There would be no assessment of the income or expenses of either parent, or their new partners.

This payment should also be set at a level which will not be seen as excessive by most people, thereby encouraging its acceptance.

How Much?

Of course, the exact level of the payment will always be controversial, but we suggest it should initially be £15 per week per child, index linked to inflation and adjusted annually.

Coupled with this mandatory fixed payment is the concept of additional voluntary payments made by the non-resident parent.

These voluntary payments would be agreed between the parents at an annual mediation session, provided free of charge. This would ensure there is discussion between the parents about how the children are to be brought up and financially supported with one separated parent.

We also propose that the mandatory payments by the non-resident parent are deducted at source (by PAYE or directly from benefits) and payments to the resident parent are made along with Child Benefit payments.

Flat-Rate Payments

There are many advantages to a simple flat-rate payment scheme, where every non-resident parent pays the same mandatory amount regardless of income or circumstances.

Most obviously, the need for an intrusive and complex assessment of earnings would be completely eliminated. Similarly, assessments would not have to be re-examined when circumstances change and there would be no need for an appeals procedure or adjudication (the only legitimate grounds for appeal would be an incorrect count of the number of children concerned!).

It also offers the advantage of predictability. Everyone knows what the immediate financial situation will be in the event of parental separation.

Under this new scheme, there would be little point in a non-resident parent minimising or falsifying their apparent earnings, as this would not reduce their mandatory payments. Indeed, it may even have the opposite effect, by encouraging non-resident parents to earn more when they no longer feel they are forced to give much of everything they earn away.



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Certainly we anticipate almost no non-resident parents will try reducing the amount they pay the CSA by voluntarily making themselves redundant, taking lower paid work, or moonlighting in the cash-only economy. There would just be no advantage to them. (In fact, because of the fixed-rate scheme, they may well end up paying proportionally *more* of their income if they did this).

Similarly, there is no financial incentive for a resident parent to block overnight or other contact with the non-resident parent, because the fixed amount would be paid regardless. We anticipate this simple change will avert many contact disputes that would otherwise have ended up in the courts.

There will predictably be some resistance to the fixed rate being at the *bottom* end of what is acceptable, but we believe this is the correct approach for a number of reasons:

1. There is no point setting a fixed-rate that many could not afford.
2. To provide a baseline that almost everybody will believe is reasonable to pay (very few people will resent paying a small, fixed amount), so the rate of compliance will be high.
3. Conversely, the rate of avoidance will be low. This is a worthwhile gain as there is no point devising a system guaranteed to criminalise a large number of non-resident parents.
4. When a non-resident parent who *did not pay* under the previous CSA, *starts* paying under the new scheme, it seems more likely they will subsequently start paying extra or become involved in the parenting of their child.
5. It will encourage co-operation as resident parents will wish to benefit from voluntary payments made by non-resident parents.

Improving co-operation between parents?

Improved co-operation and reducing conflict between parents will bring enormous benefits to children of separated parents and should not be overlooked as a merely incidental benefit of the scheme.

Does anyone *ever* hear a child say “I wish my mum and dad would argue more”?

6. More extremely, excluding parents (who currently have no incentive to act in the child’s best interests) will be encouraged to agree contact or parental involvement with the non-resident parent, because it is more likely they will then get voluntary payments from them.
7. By setting the fixed-rate low, more non-resident parents will be able to afford – and feel encouraged to make – voluntary contributions. This will empower both parents by letting them make their own arrangements.



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8. It will reduce the threat of a resident parent “getting the CSA onto you!”. Even if they do involve the CSA, they will still financially benefit from co-operating with the non-resident parent.
9. A low rate will virtually eliminate the number of non-resident parents who resent paying their contribution. Even in cases where there is little reason for the non-resident parent to pay towards the resident parent (such as when there is a 4:3 day split in contact), it is unlikely many non-resident parents will resent paying this amount.

We think the flat-rate payments will eliminate almost all financially-based disputes about the number of overnight stays and *who-pays-who* between separated parents. Because the amount is relatively small and fixed, it will just not be worth arguing about.

Another benefit of fixed rate payments is that it will eliminate the stress on the non-resident parent of a CSA assessment, (believed by some to be partly responsible for two male suicides a week in the UK). Instead of being harangued by the CSA, the non-resident parents will be empowered along with the resident parent to come to a co-operative arrangement.

Additional Voluntary Payments

Many of the ideas behind these additional voluntary payments have been discussed already.

However, one aspect of the combination of fixed payments and additional voluntary payments is that this is a far more flexible approach than the simplistic CSA (or C-MEC) principle of no more than transferring money to the resident parent.

We believe the greatest benefit to the child would come from ‘benefits in kind’ that the parents agree between themselves.

For example, rather than the non-resident parent paying the resident parent twenty pounds a week, would it not be better for the non-resident parent to agree to pay (for example) all costs of school meals, school buses and school uniforms? Apart from anything else, these are part of the real cost of having the child.

Many non-resident parents would find this sort of payment, agreed between them, far more agreeable than paying a fixed sum every week. It is entirely rational for a separated parent to resent paying money towards their ‘ex’, but far more of them would be happy to pay if they knew where the money was going. This is money undisputedly for the child, not for the other parent.

Similarly, what is the cash value of a father taking his son to football practice every Saturday morning? Of course, there is none.

By insisting solely on income transfer, the CSA (and C-MEC) devalue and discourage many other benefits the non-resident parent could provide to their children.

Reducing the mandatory element where possible and increasing co-operation is key. Carrots work better than sticks.



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Mediation

We propose that separated parents joining the scheme are provided with mediation to assist managing their parenting now they live apart. We propose that there should be one initial session on separation and then one annually. To encourage attendance, we propose these sessions are provided free of charge to both parties.

It is important to note that both sides have something to gain from these sessions. The resident parent will wish to agree voluntary payments; and the non-resident parent will benefit by agreeing to these in improved involvement with the children.

These sessions would also provide a platform for discussing and agreeing what we have called 'benefits in kind' between parents.

Although these sessions will concentrate mainly on financial arrangements, they will also have the benefit of encouraging an atmosphere of co-operation between the parents.

Accountability To Child

Currently, the only accountability for CSA payments is to the state (through the enforcement of laws).

There is no way for an adult (who's parents lived apart when they were a child) to be certain how their non-resident parent contributed, they rely entirely on the honesty and good faith of the resident parent. It is easy for a resident parent to tell the child their other parent "never paid anything" and it's very hard for the child to know otherwise.

We believe some form of accountability to the child is important, so they can subsequently see what payments were made by the non-resident parent.

To achieve this, we think it would be helpful if all additional voluntary payments were recorded to form a record of payments which can later be shown to the child (when they are an adult).

However, implementing this in full could involve technical and practical difficulties that would increase the cost and complexity of our scheme considerably. (This is especially the case if the additional voluntary payments are made in the form of promises such as "Dad will pay for all school dinners and trips").

We therefore propose that a simple paper record book is kept by the resident parent and completed by the parents and mediator at the mediation sessions. This would act as both a record of the previous year and plan for the next and be passed to the child on their eighteenth birthday.

Of course, while a paper book has many disadvantages (it can be lost, stolen, defaced etc), it also has the overriding advantages of simplicity (it can be photocopied as a backup), flexibility and minimal cost. On the whole we feel the book would be a useful record for the majority of parents who co-operate reasonably well.



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This accountability means a non-resident parent would be answerable to the child (as an adult), “*Why* did you not pay any additional payments towards my keep?” Non-resident parents would understand this and we believe this accountability would also make it far more likely they would decide to contribute voluntarily.

Although non-resident parents may feel happy to cheat the state, far fewer would wish to be shown proof *by their own child* that they voluntarily chose to cheat them of income when they were younger.

Deduction at Source, Payment with Child Benefit

We propose that the fixed rate payments are deducted at source by the Inland Revenue from the non-resident parent’s salary using the PAYE mechanism, or deducted direct from the non-resident parent’s benefit payments. Thus it would be hard to avoid these payments.

Another benefit of deduction at source is this can automatically take account of low income non-resident parents who do not pay enough tax, or receive enough benefits, to cover the fixed payment. In these cases, we believe there should be a fixed amount the non-resident parent still has to pay regardless.

Similarly, we propose the flat rate payment is paid to the resident parent using the same mechanism as currently used to pay child benefit. This has the advantage that millions of people already receive this benefit and the payment mechanisms are well established. This avoids the complexities of separate mechanisms for paying child support and child benefit.



Migration into this Scheme

We propose that this scheme should automatically be used on new child support cases, and that for existing CSA cases resident parents are encouraged to transfer to the scheme by a cash incentive.

Cases Transferring from old CSA

Because the resident parent may be concerned their income will initially be reduced on this new scheme, we propose that resident parents who transfer to the new scheme from the CSA are paid a cash bonus. This will reflect the savings in administration costs from the old CSA scheme and further encourage a co-operative approach from the resident parent from the start.

We suggest this bonus payment should be about five hundred pounds per child, with the payment being made after both parties have attended the first mediation session.

We also propose a similar but smaller payment is made to the non-resident parent joining the scheme, paid after mediation and after regular fixed payments have started. We suggest this should be around one hundred pounds.

New Cases

Where the CSA are not previously involved, we propose both parents are paid a cash bonus of around two hundred pounds each for joining the scheme, paid after they have attended their first mediation session.

(Consideration may have to be given to reduce the possibility of fraud, where couples falsely claim they have separated and then join the scheme for the cash bonuses).

Benefits of Cash Incentives

We think it advantageous that – in all cases – both parents have an incentive to join the scheme. For a comparatively small initial investment by the treasury, the benefits would be reduced costs and improved co-operation between parents in the future, resulting in happier, better adjusted and better parented children.



Conclusion

The CSA failed because its priorities were wrong, it was poorly implemented, it lacked fairness and it did not acknowledge the potential benefits to children of improving their relationship with their separated parent.

We believe the replacement scheme (C-MEC) outlined in the white paper, while improving on the CSA by leaving more parents to make their own arrangements, will repeat (and compound) most of the same mistakes.

In devising a system almost guaranteed to reduce co-operation – and increase conflict – between separated parents, the government have shown exactly the same lack of vision and understanding exhibited by the original CSA. Indeed, we believe that C-MEC will make things worse for the children of separated parents than even the CSA has done.

We predict that the C-MEC will fail as surely as the CSA has failed, and for most of the same reasons.

Ultimately, by attaching no more than a monetary value to the parenting of a child, the government are demonstrating their contempt for the potential benefits of non-resident parents (mostly fathers, of course) having a shared parental relationship with their children.

The government are showing, through their approach to the CSA/C-MEC, that they truly know the price of everything, but the value of nothing.

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