

Child Maintenance is changing

A new organisation

The Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission is the new Non-Departmental Public Body responsible for the child maintenance system in Great Britain. With the primary objective of maximising the number of effective child maintenance arrangements in place for children who live apart from one or both parents, the Commission will: promote the financial responsibility that parents have for their children; provide information and support about the different child maintenance options available; and provide an efficient statutory child maintenance service, with effective enforcement.

The Commission became a legal entity in July 2008 and has begun to put in place the infrastructure and support services necessary to manage its core functions. The Commission will introduce changes incrementally, taking over the running of the Child Support Agency, its two existing schemes, and the delivery of the third year of the Agency's Operational Improvement Plan towards the end of 2008.

What are the key changes?

The wide ranging changes include:

- Extending the same options for arranging child maintenance to all parents by removing the requirement for those parents with main day-to-day care and claiming benefits to use the statutory scheme – enabling all parents to choose the arrangement which best suits their circumstances;
- Ensuring more money is delivered to lower income families, by extending and increasing the benefit disregard – the amount of child maintenance paid that parents with the main day-to-day care can keep without it affecting their benefits;
- Providing an information and support service – *Child Maintenance Options* – to enable parents to make an informed choice about whether private, statutory or court-based arrangements are most suited to their circumstances;

- Tackling non-compliance and debt collection, through an enhanced enforcement regime and improvements in debt management; and
- Simplifying and streamlining assessments and improving the collection process for the *statutory maintenance service*.

What services will be available for customers?

Child Maintenance Options: This new service is designed to help parents understand the full range of options available for putting a child maintenance arrangement in place. It will provide impartial information and support to both parents so they are able to make informed choices about those arrangements most suited to their circumstances. This will include information on other issues parents might face in making arrangements, such as housing or money worries, and the service will put people in touch with organisations that can provide expert help.

The service will be delivered through a national helpline and online via a website providing accessible and practical information; and via a face-to-face service for those in most need of more personalised help and support.

The statutory maintenance service: This will help put in place arrangements to support parents when a private arrangement is not possible or breaks down, taking firm and effective enforcement action against those parents who fail to meet their responsibilities to pay. While it develops and introduces a new child maintenance scheme, the Commission will be responsible for delivering and continuing to improve the two current CSA schemes. The new statutory scheme, with simpler, streamlined assessments, will be introduced from 2011. The two CSA schemes will close in 2013/14, once all clients have either moved to the new statutory scheme or made a private arrangement.

Timeline for implementation and when changes will impact on customers

- **July 2008:** the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission was established as a legal entity.
 - **July 2008:** option to choose from a range of child maintenance arrangements introduced for new benefit claimants – removing the compulsion for parents making a new benefit claim to use the statutory maintenance service currently provided by CSA.
 - **October 2008:** all parents will be able to choose the child maintenance arrangements that best suit their circumstances supported by Child Maintenance Options. The requirement that parents with the main day-to-day care claiming benefit are treated as applying for child maintenance will be removed for all (including existing Child Support Agency clients previously compelled to use the statutory maintenance service).
- Parents claiming benefits will be able to keep more of any child maintenance received, up to £20 per week, without it affecting their benefits, meaning more money will flow to low income families. Child maintenance payments will be fully disregarded when calculating Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims.
- **2009/10:** new enforcement powers will be introduced – including taking money from bank accounts. The speed and volume of enforcement action against non-compliant parents will significantly increase with the introduction of administrative liability orders rather than court-based liability orders.
 - **April 2010:** a full child maintenance disregard will be introduced. All parents with care will be able to keep all child maintenance paid without it affecting their benefits.
 - **From 2011:** the new statutory maintenance scheme will be established. Latest available tax year information from HM Revenue and Customs will be used for child maintenance calculations, which will be based on gross rather than net income. Existing clients on the current schemes can choose to apply to the new statutory scheme, or move into private arrangements, a process that is anticipated to take two to three years.
 - **2013/14:** the new system of child maintenance will be fully operational.

Further information

For more about the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission and the reforms to child maintenance, visit www.childmaintenance.org

For information about the options available for arranging child maintenance, and for details of other organisations that parents can contact for further information, advice and support, visit www.cmoptions.org