

CSA2047

This charter and our other leaflets are available in a range of languages (including Welsh), Braille, large print and on audiotape. For a copy, call the national helpline on **08457 133 133**. Textphone users can call **08457 138 924**

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www.csa.gov.uk

Child Support Agency Client Charter 2007

child support agency

Part of the Department for Work and Pensions

Introduction

The Child Support Agency (CSA) is part of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Our role is to help ensure that parents who live apart from their children contribute financially to their upkeep by paying child maintenance.

We calculate and collect child maintenance from the parent who is not the main day-to-day carer of their child (the non-resident parent) and make sure that it is paid to the parent or person who is the main day-to-day carer of the child (the parent with care).

This charter provides an overview of our work and tells you what standards of service you can expect from us. It also explains how you can give us feedback and what to do if things go wrong.

Applying for child maintenance

Parents with care who are getting Income Support (IS) or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA(IB)) do not have to apply separately for child maintenance. IS or JSA(IB) claims will be treated as an application for child maintenance and will automatically be referred to the CSA by Jobcentre Plus. This also applies to parents with care who are living with someone who is claiming IS or JSA(IB).

Parents with care who are claiming IS or JSA(IB) can 'opt out' of applying for child maintenance, but may have their benefit reduced if there is not a good cause for opting out.

Most other parents can choose whether or not they want to apply to the CSA for child maintenance.

An overview of our services

We offer two child maintenance services: a calculation-only service and a calculation and collection service. We do not charge for these services.

Either parent can ask to use our calculation-only service, where we work out how much child maintenance should be paid. Where a calculation-only service has been requested, you can still ask to use our calculation and collection service at any time.

If both parents agree for the non-resident parent to pay child maintenance direct to the parent with care, they need not have any further contact with the CSA. This way of paying is called 'maintenance direct' and it may be a more convenient and quicker way of paying. If payments made this way do break down, the CSA can still enforce payment of arrears.

We usually collect child maintenance from non-resident parents when:

- The parent with care is getting IS or JSA(IB); or
- Either the non-resident parent or the parent with care asks us to.

Our calculation and collection service also includes managing all payments and, where appropriate, enforcing payments.

Improving our service

In February 2006 we launched a three-year Operational Improvement Plan designed to improve our service. We want to focus on the things that matter most to you: faster and more accurate calculations, regular and full payments, better enforcement and a quicker response to queries and changes in your circumstances.

We aim to:

- Help more children to benefit from maintenance payments;
- Deal with applications and changes of circumstances quickly and accurately;
- Take quicker and firmer action against those who fail to pay; and
- Provide a service that supports you and responds to your needs.

A new way of working

To meet these goals, we are changing the way we:

- collect information;
- process child maintenance applications and manage our cases; and
- organise ourselves, to ensure we focus on improving the effectiveness of our services.

We are continuing to improve our compliance rates by issuing Deductions from Earnings Orders (DEOs) quickly and effectively, and by taking more enforcement action to ensure that child support goes to those who need it.

For a copy of the Operational Improvement Plan, go to www.csa.gov.uk/new/oip or call our national helpline on **08457 133 133**.

The future of child support

On 13 December 2006 the Government published the White Paper 'A new system of child maintenance' which outlined the future for child maintenance. The White Paper, which will be subject to consultation and legislation, included the creation of a new Non-Departmental Public Body called the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (C-MEC). This will replace the existing Child Support Agency and will offer a simplified and streamlined child maintenance assessment process, improved collection and enforcement processes and help parents to make their own child maintenance choices.

The Child Support Agency is still open and will exist until C-MEC takes over its work. For now there won't be any changes to the way your case is handled. We don't expect any changes to affect you until 2008 – 2009 and we will let you know before anything happens.

Our service standards

We aim to be professional and responsive, helpful and courteous in all our dealings with clients. We have set minimum standards of service which we aim to meet in each of our main business areas. These standards are set out here. If we do not reach these standards, we will do our best to keep you informed and explain what is happening.

What you can expect from us

First contact

Standard 1 If the parent with care can give us contact details for the non-resident parent, we will start gathering information from the non-resident parent within four weeks of the application being received. We will aim to make an accurate decision on the application within 12 weeks, but in some cases this may take as long as 26 weeks.

If we do not have current contact details for the non-resident parent, we will trace them as quickly as we can. These applications may take longer to progress. In the small number of cases where we cannot trace the non-resident parent, we will not be able to progress the application.

Payments

Standard 2 Where we are collecting child maintenance, we aim to make a first payment to the parent with care within six weeks of making the initial payment arrangements with the non-resident parent.

If the non-resident parent has a job but either fails or refuses to pay, we will aim to obtain payment via a Deduction from Earnings Order (DEO) within four months of making initial payment arrangements.

Where the non-resident parent has still not paid four months after initial payment arrangements were made, we will refer the case to our specialist enforcement unit.

Standard 3 We will make maintenance payments to parents with care within a week of receiving the money from the non-resident parent.

Enforcement

Where a case has been referred to our specialist enforcement unit and we need to take enforcement action through the courts, our first step will be to obtain a liability order from the Magistrates' Court (in England and Wales) or the Sheriff Court (in Scotland) to establish the debt.

We will then use bailiffs or other methods available to us to enforce payment of the debt through the courts.

If the debt is still not paid, we may apply to the courts for the non-resident parent to be sent to prison. We can also ask for the non-resident parent's driving licence to be confiscated, or stop them from obtaining one.

Response times

Standard 4 We aim to answer telephone calls within one minute.

Standard 5 We aim to reply to letters and either resolve complaints, or agree next steps, within three weeks of receiving them.

Complaints

If you have a complaint about our service, you should first contact the person who has been dealing with your case, or their manager, either by phone or in writing. If they cannot resolve your complaint, you can contact the

Complaints Resolution Team at the office that is handling your application.

All contact details are available at www.csa.gov.uk or from our national helpline on **08457 133 133**. Contact details should also appear on any letters we have sent you.

If you are not happy with the way we have dealt with your complaint, you can contact the Independent Case Examiner's office within six months of receiving a final reply to your complaint from or on behalf of the Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency. The Independent Case Examiner is not part of the CSA and offers a free and impartial service. You can find out more about the Independent Case Examiner by reading the leaflet *The Independent Case Examiner's Office – Our Service and Standards*, which you can get by:

- writing to: The Independent Case Examiner,
PO Box 155, Chester CH99 9SA;
- ringing 0845 606 0777; or
- visiting their website at www.ind-case-exam.org.uk.

If you think we have made the wrong decision

If you think we have made the wrong decision, you can ask us to look at it again. This is called an appeal. You can also ask us to explain how we made the decision. Please contact the office you have been dealing with within a month of receiving the letter telling you about our decision.

Standard 6 There are up to three stages to the appeals process.

Stage 1

At this stage, we will look at your appeal and either:

- revise the decision ourselves; or
- submit the appeal to the Tribunals Service for action.

Currently around half of all appeals are resolved within the CSA at this stage.

This stage will take an average of 10 weeks.

Stage 2

If the Tribunals Service is dealing with the appeal, they will investigate and notify us of their decision within 19 weeks of the appeal being submitted to them.

The Tribunals Service is part of Department for Constitutional Affairs and provides common administrative support for the main central government tribunals.

The Tribunals Service has the responsibility of bringing together the people involved to ensure that an unbiased decision is reached in a way that best meets your expectations.

Stage 3

Once the Tribunals Service has notified us of their decision, we will revise your child maintenance decision if necessary. This stage will take an average of one week.

As information becomes available later in the year, we will be developing further service standards to cover:

- processing changes of circumstances; and
- restoring payments after breakdown.

What you can do to help

You can help us deal with your case quickly and accurately by giving us the information we need. When you contact us:

- tell us your National Insurance number and your CSA reference number (if you have one);
- make sure the information you give us is accurate and up to date; and
- if we need any further information, try to give it to us as quickly as possible.

If you are responsible for paying child maintenance:

- make sure you pay the full amount regularly and on time; and
- let us know if you are unable to pay or if your circumstances change.

If you have difficulty paying, contact us straight away so we can discuss alternative arrangements.

Feedback

We want to provide an improving service to everyone who needs our help.

We welcome your views on how we can improve this charter.

You can contact us via our website at www.csa.gov.uk or by writing to:

The Child Support Agency
PO Box 55
Brierley Hill
West Midlands
DY5 1YL

Further information and advice

Helpline

For information and advice about child maintenance, call our national helpline on **08457 133 133**.

Lines are open from 8am to 8pm, Monday to Friday, and 9am to 5pm on Saturdays. Calls are charged at local rates.

If you use a textphone, you can call **08457 138 924**.

Website

You can find out more information about our services at www.csa.gov.uk.

The website also includes downloadable copies of all our leaflets, an online maintenance calculator, answers to frequently asked questions and links to other useful websites.

Leaflets

There are a range of other information leaflets available from the CSA. You can download these from our website at www.csa.gov.uk/new/leaflets/ or you can get them by calling our national helpline on 08457 133 133.

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