

Child Maintenance Services: is the current system fit for purpose?



**citizens
advice**

**Hull &
East Riding**

Introduction

The Child Maintenance Service (CMS) was created to ensure that children receive financial support from both parents following separation. It is designed to reduce child poverty, promote fairness and ensure that children do not lose out because of relationship breakdowns.

However, evidence from **Citizens Advice Hull & East Riding** clients shows that the system often fails to deliver. Parents experience:

- inaccurate calculations
- weak enforcement
- poor communication
- unnecessary charges.

In the last year, we have seen a 45% increase in complaints about child maintenance calculations, and a 39% rise in parents – paying and receiving – challenging and appealing their calculations. Additionally, we have seen a 22% increase in issues relating to CMS payments including collection by CMS.

The Government has recognised some of these challenges and announced reforms in 2025, following the consultation *Child Maintenance: Improving the Collection and Transfer of Payments*.

These reforms aim to simplify the system, improve compliance and reduce unfair costs – but significant gaps remain.

These proposed changes require legislative approval and are not expected to be implemented until 2027 or 2028 at the earliest, subject to Parliamentary time. In the meantime, families continue to face many of the same barriers the reforms seek to address.



Overview of the current system

The CMS replaced the Child Support Agency (CSA) in 2012, offering two main service types:

- **Direct Pay** – where the CMS calculates the maintenance, but parents transfer payments privately
- **Collect and Pay** – where the CMS collects the payment and passes it to the receiving parent.

A £20 application fee applies, along with collection charges – 4% deducted from receiving parents and a 20% surcharge added to paying parents.

The Government now plans to abolish Direct Pay and introduce a single, monitored service where all payments are transferred from the CMS. This aims to make payment tracking automatic, reduce conflict between parents, and remove the need for victims of abuse to pursue non-compliance themselves. The reform also proposes to lower collection fees to 2% for compliant parents and 20% for non-compliant ones – a positive but partial step towards fairness.

These reforms acknowledge that the current two-tier system is confusing and inconsistent. However, as they depend on primary legislation, their introduction remains several years away, meaning that many families will continue to experience the shortcomings of the existing CMS in the interim.

Key issues

Enforcement: persistent weaknesses and slow action

Enforcement remains one of the system's greatest weaknesses. Non-payment is common, and many parents wait months before any recovery action is taken. Clients describe frustration at the lack of follow-up even when arrears are large and ongoing.

The Government has pledged to improve this by using the new single-service model to automatically identify missed payments and trigger enforcement without the receiving parent needing to report non-compliance. This could significantly reduce arrears – but with legislative changes not expected before 2027-2028, thousands of parents will remain without effective enforcement in the meantime.

Calculation errors and outdated data

Many clients experience incorrect assessment caused by outdated HMRC income data, especially where self-employment or fluctuating earnings are involved. Reassessments can take a long time, leaving parents uncertain and unable to budget.

A forthcoming Government consultation on maintenance calculations, expected later in 2025, will review how income is assessed – the first review in over 20 years. This offers an opportunity to modernise the formula, including consideration of real-time income reporting. This is something we support but must stress that reforms must also improve communication and appeal processes so errors can be corrected quickly.

Until new legislation is enacted, the current calculation system – and its flaws and loopholes – will remain in place for several more years.

Key issues

Complexity and bureaucracy

The CMS system is often described as opaque and exhausting. Clients face long wait times, inconsistent advice and limited access to case information online.

The new centralised payment model may reduce some confusion by simplifying the routes through which payments are managed, but this must be paired with improvements in customer service and staff training. Without a clear point of contact, families risk getting lost in the system again under a new structure.

Given the delay before implementation, short-term investment in staff capacity and clearer communication tools is essential to prevent further distress for parents navigating the existing system.

Survivors of domestic abuse

Survivors of abuse often cannot safely use private arrangements, yet CMS processes have historically required them to do so. The 2025 reforms promise to improve protection by introducing named caseworkers, enhanced training on coercive control, and removing the requirement for victims to report non-compliance.

This is a vital improvement. However, the legislative timetable means these protections will not take effect for several years, leaving survivors reliant on a system that can still expose them to risk.

Unfair fees and charges

The £20 application fee and collection deductions penalise those who rely most on the CMS. For a single parent on a low income, losing 4% of their child maintenance can make a real difference.

The Government has proposed a fairer fee structure: lowering charges to 2% for compliant cases and keeping a 20% surcharge only for non-compliant paying parents.

As these changes depend on new legislation, the current fee system will continue to disadvantage vulnerable families until at least 2027.

Evasion and informal work

Some paying parents avoid maintenance by working cash-in-hand or concealing income. Because CMS assessments rely heavily on official income data, this remains a major gap.

While the Government has acknowledged this problem, concrete measures are still lacking. The forthcoming formula review presents an opportunity to expand data-sharing with HMRC and improve detection of undeclared income – but this will also require legislative changes and will take time to implement.

The human impact

Citizens Advice Hull and East Riding regularly supports parents struggling to secure child maintenance. Many come to us after months of missed payments, inaccurate assessments or confusion about how to challenge decisions.

In the last year, we have seen a 45% increase in complaints about child maintenance calculations, and a 39% calculation in parents – paying and receiving – challenging and appealing their calculations. Additionally, we have seen a 22% increase in issues relating to CMS payments including collection by CMS.

For some families, maintenance payments determine whether they can pay rent or afford food. When payments stop, parents are forced to borrow, fall into debt or rely on food banks. On the other hand, paying parents who suffer issues with the formula resulting in incorrect payments find themselves in these positions. Our clients describe feeling powerless and let down by a system that is meant to protect them.

The Government's planned reforms are a step forward, particularly for survivors of abuse and those caught in enforcement delays. Yet for many of our clients, promises of reform must translate into visible, practical change – timely payments, clear communication, and a system that works in the best interests of children.

In one case, our client was in an abusive relationship which has ended. They applied for Child Maintenance and this was rejected on the basis of the parent saying the kids live with them – this was untrue, but Child Maintenance closed the case.

One client applied for Child Maintenance. They did not know the current address of their ex-partner, or where in the country they are. The only information is their parents' address, and our client has no contact with her ex-partner or their family. They were told by Child Maintenance that they cannot process the case until our client finds the address for them, and have offered no support. They are now reliant on foodbanks.

One client is disabled and currently homeless. They work variable hours and their income therefore fluctuates. However CM are using their previous tax year's income, which has led to significant CM arrears and now other debts. They are struggling to get through to CM to discuss, and our adviser tried across two days with the client and was unable to get through to someone.

One client raised significant issues with the customer service at Child Maintenance. They faced long call hold times, to then have the phone hung up on many occasions, and to be told they were not allowed to make a complaint.

Recommendations for further improvement

While we welcome the Government's recognition of CMS failings, additional measures are needed to ensure reforms deliver lasting results:

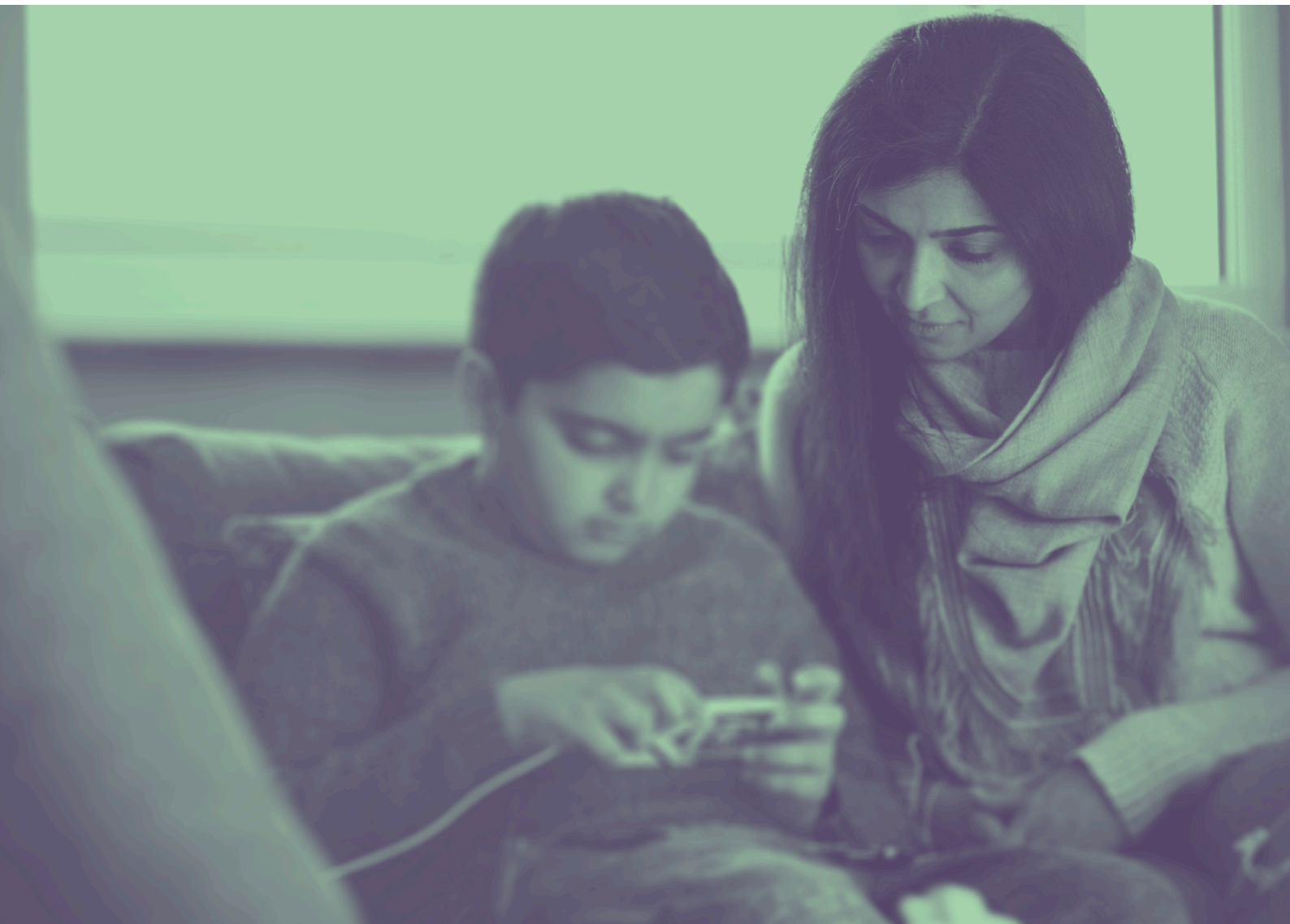
- 1** Invest in enforcement capacity so that automatic detection of missed payments leads to swift recovery
- 2** Waive all collection charges for low-income families and abuse survivors
- 3** Ensure a smooth transition from Direct Pay to the new single-service model with clear communication and minimal disruption
- 4** Introduce trauma-informed, specialist case handling for all survivors of domestic abuse
- 5** Update the calculation formula to reflect modern work patterns and real-time income data
- 6** Implement interim improvements immediately so families are not left struggling until 2027-2028

Conclusion

The Child Maintenance Service is a vital tool in reducing child poverty and ensuring fairness after separation, but for too many families, it remains unreliable and burdensome. The Government's 2025 reforms represent a positive step towards a more effective and compassionate system.

However, these changes depend on parliamentary approval and will not be in place for several years. With legislative implementation unlikely before 2027 or 2028, it is essential that interim action is taken now. Strong enforcement, fair charges and accessible support must be prioritised so that no child loses out while waiting for reform.

Only then can the CMS truly be said to be fit for purpose, ensuring that every child receives the support they deserve.



**Hull &
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