

## **Policy Briefing**

### **Green Paper – Strengthening families, promoting parental responsibility: the future of child maintenance**

The Coalition Government is in the process of implementing a new child support system from 2012. They say that the previous reforms set out by the Labour Government “did not go far enough to promote collaborative arrangements between parents” or to promote “active decisions by parents before applying to the new scheme.”<sup>1</sup> Some of the new measures include:

- *More accessible advice and support services – the government wants parents to find it easier to come to a **‘private arrangement’** without having to go to the Child Support Agency or the courts;*
- *A **compulsory ‘gateway’** to access the child maintenance scheme – a parent will only have access to this ‘gateway’ if they can show they have taken ‘reasonable steps’ to establish a ‘private arrangement’;*
- *If a parent wants to find out how much their partner should be paying for child maintenance a **‘calculation only’ service** via the ‘gateway’ will be possible for a **fee of between £20-£25**;*
- *For parents with child/ren who wish to use the new full child maintenance system there will be an **application fee of £100** (£50 if on benefit, with £20 paid upfront and the rest in instalments). It should be noted victims of domestic violence would be exempt, however Government has not set out how they will establish if domestic violence has occurred.*
- *Where the full child maintenance system is used the parent with child/ren would face a deduction of between **7% and 12% of any child maintenance paid**; the non-resident parent would pay an extra **“collection surcharge” of between 15-20%**. The collection of child maintenance through the ‘gateway’ will only be available to a parent with child/ren if the non-resident parent agrees, or the parent with child/ren can show that child maintenance is unlikely to be paid.<sup>2</sup> If enforcement is necessary there will be further charges - **enforcement charges** (unspecified at the moment) which would be applied to the parent who is non-resident.*

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<sup>1</sup> (2011) Impact Assessment for strengthening *families, promoting parental responsibility: the future of child maintenance*. DWP <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/ia-strengthening-families.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <sup>iv</sup> Welfare Reform Bill 2011 Clause 129

What the Women's Support Network says:

- Private arrangements between partners are not always possible for a number of reasons. Women are more likely to be the main carer in a single parent household<sup>3</sup>; therefore women will be placed in a very vulnerable position.
- WSN feel it is totally unjustified to charge one parent families for either the 'calculation fee' or the 'application fee'. This will have a detrimental impact on women who are already struggling in these austere times. We fear that women will be put off seeking child maintenance payments because they are unable to afford the fees.
- Many children are already living in poverty in Northern Ireland. By discouraging women to use the new system to seek child maintenance payments, will only prove to exacerbate the number of children living in poverty. The Government make it quite clear the reason for the charges is to discourage people from using the system: 'the main savings from a charging regime will not be the charges themselves but by fewer parents using the system as a result.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gingerbreadni.org/Pdf/Possibilities%20Project/Lone%20parents%20speak%20out%20final%20report%20June%2008.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Child Maintenance 7990, page 21, paragraph 22