

Child Support Reform: The views and experiences of CSA staff and new clients

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This large-scale qualitative research study investigated the views of Child Support Agency (CSA) staff and new clients about the child support reforms introduced in March 2003. The overall aim was to gain initial results on how well the new child support scheme was working in practice

The research consisted of 42 interviews with front-line staff in focus groups, plus twelve managers who were interviewed separately. These covered all the regionally based business units within CSA and took place during March-April 2004. Among new clients 58 interviews were conducted with people, both non-resident parents and parents with care, from three of the business units between May and September of 2004.

The research was conducted for DWP by researchers from the Personal Finance Research Centre based within the School for Geographical Sciences at Bristol University.

Key findings

- Overall both staff and clients were supportive of the CSA reform principles, in particular the simplification of the method to calculate maintenance.
- The research however highlighted that there had been a large number of problems in implementing the new scheme, many of them linked to the new IT systems.
- Staff described a computer system with many problems, not suited to their jobs, and subject to delays and an inability to progress cases.

- Managers and other staff expressed frustration at inadequate training provision.
- Knowledge of the Child Maintenance Premium was very low among clients, and sometimes limited among staff.

Summary of research

Introduction

A new child support scheme was introduced as part of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000, and implemented from March 2003 for new cases. A complex formula for setting maintenance was replaced by a simpler calculation based on fixed percentages of net income (e.g. 15 per cent for one child).

This qualitative research project aimed to explore how reform was being received among both CSA staff and new clients of the Agency.

Research with CSA staff

Awareness of the reforms and new scheme

Staff had high expectations of reform. Staff from each of the seven Business Units (BU) thought that the old scheme was overly complicated and caused problems for staff and clients. Staff thought the new scheme was fairer and should mean quicker calculations – it was more transparent and easily understood. Few

appreciated that at first only new cases would be dealt with under the new rules.

Implementation of the new scheme and new IT

Several managers commented on the difficulty in changing everything at once (IT, telephony, data recording, etc.). None of the frontline staff was happy with the training they had received, and mentioned the inexperience of the trainers and inappropriate course content. Managers also expressed frustration at inadequate training provision.

How the new scheme is working in practice

All felt frustrated by the complexity of a computer system that was meant to be straightforward.

Friction between helpline staff and other teams was common, as each felt the other was not doing enough to get cases dealt with by the right person, but opportunities for more contact seemed to reduce tensions.

Staff were overwhelmingly negative about the new computer system, CS2 – the most widely discussed issue at every group interview. The computer system had many problems, wasn't suited to their role, made worse in some instances by inadequate training. The lack of a 'notepad' facility was strongly mourned, as it provided a useful client record.

Members of staff were frustrated by the speed of the new system and embarrassed when callers were kept on hold whilst screens refreshed very slowly. Some staff said that they were entering some incorrect information to fill in unknown details so that they could get the system to continue with the case, whilst others took notes whilst clients were on the phone.

Some managers were hopeful that CS2 could be made to work well.

Staff and managers reported problems with data coming from the Jobcentre Plus Interface – information received by CSA was often wrong or

incomplete, even if correctly entered. Frontline staff could not provide a good level of service if the computer system kept failing them.

Operational issues

Some staff felt that e-mail was being over used as a means of conveying important information such as system workarounds and as a method of communicating.

Some members of staff had positive experiences of dealing with clients, and one reported getting thank-you letters from parents with care. Clients seemed less likely to contest the maintenance decision on the new rules than they had on the old.

The overwhelming message from staff was that morale was so bad that most frontline CSA staff were looking to leave. Staff believed that many members of staff were taking long term sick leave because of high stress levels. Some managers thrived on the pressure that caused stress in others; others were as stressed as their staff.

Performance Management and Productivity

Most focus group participants felt that their immediate line manager was aware of the pressures they were under but that the higher levels of the management were less likely to know the extent of the problems.

When there were no snags it was possible to make cases progress and reach a final calculation much more quickly than would have been possible before – some were proud about completing cases within a day. But other conversations indicated that compliance had gone down, and debt work was taking much longer than before.

Managing varied targets was described as trying to keep several plates spinning at once.

Most staff and managers were concerned about the prospect of mass conversion of cases from the old rules to the new rules.

Benefits and limitations

There was an overwhelming sense of frustration with the system, although some things had changed for the better. Staff talked enthusiastically about the simplification of the rules, and the benefits these had brought to both staff and clients.

Staff generally mentioned limitations that related to the computers rather than the new scheme. Managers, like staff, were more frustrated with computer problems than by any aspect of the reform. However there were some specific concerns (e.g. about shared care and the way stepchildren were included). Most thought that phasing (of maintenance calculations) was unnecessary, and that the variations scheme was an unnecessary relic of the previous scheme.

Research with CSA clients

Characteristics of participants

The 58 interviewees had diverse and changing circumstances. A few clients interviewed were both Non-Resident Parents (NRPs) and Parents With Care (PWCs) whilst others had switched from being the NRP to the PWC or vice versa.

Some NRPs tried very hard to maintain contact. Other NRPs had been prevented from having unmonitored access to their children because of alleged acts of violence.

Understanding and awareness of the CSA

Most clients formed their expectations based on fragmented information about the CSA from the media or friends. Very few had any in-depth knowledge on which to base their expectations.

Most of the respondents who felt they knew something about the calculation were under the impression that the CSA took 15 or 20 per cent of income. Some indicated that the percentage increased with number of children. A considerable proportion of clients (wrongly) assumed that housing costs were taken into account. One was

aware that travel costs could be included, but others travelling long distances to visit children did not know this.

Some clients had potentially significant misconceptions about the rules. Very few were aware that the rules had changed recently (though all were new rules clients). The vast majority of benefits claimants that were interviewed were unaware of the Child Maintenance Premium. Among those few who knew about it several commented that the amount (£10) was too low.

The application process

Child support reform has meant shorter forms. Some people had difficulty understanding and completing forms, but others reported that they found it straightforward. Many clients reported that they returned more than one form, because the original had been lost. Some had also been subsequently phoned by staff who asked for details that had already been provided.

It was also apparent that the telephone system was causing frustrations and that very few people had found that they could speak to a member of staff who knew anything about them, or who were able to answer their questions easily. Staff often did not call back even when they had arranged a time to do so, according to clients.

Very few clients felt they had been consistently treated well on the telephone; male clients tended to feel less well treated than female clients, but this could be reflecting their typical role (payer not recipient) rather than gender. However a few noted that some members of staff were polite and helpful. Some women on benefits felt discriminated against and one felt that staff did not take her seriously because she was claiming benefits.

Some NRPs felt that the calculated level was fair and reflected what they felt able to pay. A few NRPs did not seem overly bothered by the *amount* calculated, but were more concerned that the *method* of calculating their ability to pay was fair. Some added that they were more interested in the *use* of the money.

Impact

Some PWCs were frustrated that the CSA did not do more to guarantee a regular income from their ex-partner. Typically parents with care who were receiving payments stated that the money was very important to them, enabling them to buy things for their children such as school clothes, shoes and outdoor coats.

In a few cases, the PWC felt that the overall impact of the involvement of the CSA had been negative despite their ex-partners being compliant.

A number of NRPs felt that their ex-partners were 'playing the system' - fraudulently claiming Income Support or other benefits. PWCs also thought that some NRPs were not declaring all their income.

What needs changing, according to clients

For many clients, their main hope was that the CSA would function in a generally efficient way – that calls would be answered, staff would get back to them as agreed, and they would not have to repeat information. All too often, according to clients, these modest aspirations were not met.

Both PWCs and NRPs perceived that there was a hard core of people who were not compliant – this was based on a combination of press and media attention, and what they might have heard from friends and contacts. In many cases there was a good deal of scepticism about the effectiveness of the CSA in dealing with such difficult groups, despite a perception that these, were the true target of child support legislation.

It is all parties' interests to avoid arrears building up stage. There was frequent mention of the potential benefits of an early accessible face-to-face service.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 789 2. Research Report 232. March 2005).

It is available from Paul Noakes at the address below.

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