

**A report by Sir David Henshaw for the
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions**

Making the Child Support system work better



An easyread guide

July 2006

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1. Introduction



This is an easyread report about child support.



Child support is the money paid by the parent who does not live with their children for their children's needs.



We have a child support system to make this happen.



This paper is based on a report by Sir David Henshaw called 'Recovering child support: routes to responsibility'.



The report is about what should be done to make the child support system work better.

This report was written after:



- looking at the way child support works in other countries;



- asking people who use or work in the child support system what they think of it at the moment and about how it should be changed.



Ideas about what should be changed are in boxes like this:



What should be done



2. A few words by Sir David Henshaw

To the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions



You asked me to look at ways of changing the child support system by looking at:



- how to make sure that parents who do not live with their children pay something for them;



- finding good and reasonable ways to run the child support system; and



- how to move over to a new system and make sure that parents know how to get the support they need.



The child support system does not work well at the moment and the Government cannot work with it.



This report is about the main changes that need to be made to policy, plans and the organisation. There is still a lot to do but the ideas in this report are a good start.

I have looked at these main areas:



- children;



- what the Government and parents should do; and



- making sure parents support their children.



Parents should support their children and be able to organise who pays what.



Where parents cannot or will not agree, the Government needs to step in to help make sure that children get the money they need.



The Government should have the power to help and make sure that parents pay what they should.



Parents have the right to get the money they need and we need a service that makes sure this happens.

Changes need to be made to the child support system to make these things happen, including:



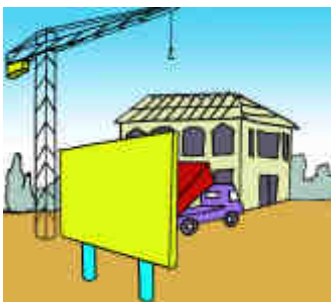
- making sure parents can support their children whether they are on benefits or not;



- most parents on benefits should be able to keep any child support money they get. This would help make sure that fewer children are poor;



- replacing the Child Support Agency so that the new system does not have to take on its problems; and



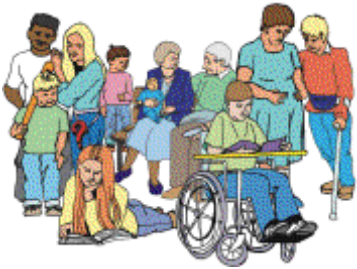
- setting up a new organisation which focuses on child welfare and making sure parents pay what they should to support their children.



There is a lot to be done. I think a group should be set up to plan and carry out the changes. It should be made up of a wide range of people who have a range of knowledge and know how to set up public and private organisations that work well.



Making sure that children get the support they need is at the heart of these changes. We have the chance to change things now.



I would like to thank the Redesign team, Government and all the people who have given us information that helped us write this paper.



Sir David Henshaw
July 2006

3. The main ideas in the report



Child support should be about making children's lives better.



Parents must make sure that their children get the financial support they need.



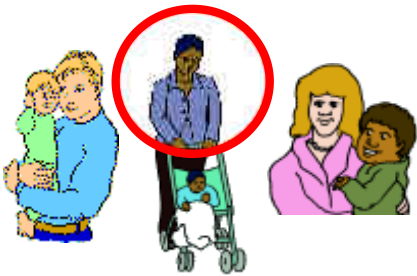
The Government should help parents do this if needed.

4. What is happening at the moment?

The child support system is not working



At the moment the system is not working for children, parents, people who pay tax or for the Government.



Only 1 in 3 of the parents with children living with them get help to pay for what their children need.



The Child Support Agency was set up to help save money but it costs around £200 million a year to run.

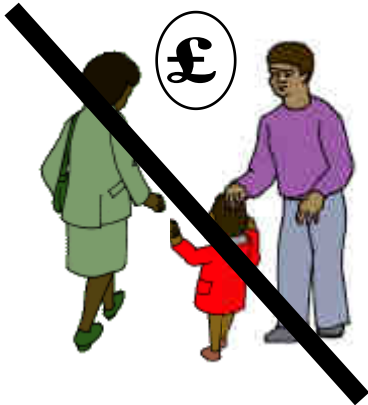


Many parents do not want to have to use the Child Support Agency. The Government spends a lot on a system which does not collect a lot of money for children.

The way the system is planned and set up means it does not work



At the moment, all separated parents whose children live with them and who are on certain benefits have to use the Child Support Agency.



The Child Support Agency say how much money the other parent will pay. They are not allowed to agree it themselves. This means that a lot of parents do not want to use the service.



Most money the parent gets is taken off their benefit. The parents who have paid see the money going to the Government and not to their children.




Many people are in difficult situations which the system cannot keep up with. Some people are in and out of work or do not get on with each other very well.



The Child Support has not worked well. There have been problems in the way it has been run and with the computers it uses.

5. How to make things better

Parents on Benefits




What should be done

Parents on benefits should not be made to use the Child Support Agency.




Most parents should be able to keep their full benefits when they get child support money. This will mean more parents will be happy to pay support and more money will go to children.



What should be done

The amount of child support money that parents can keep when they are on Income Support or Jobseekers Allowance (IB) should be much more than now.



Parents who only get Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit should be able to keep all child support money.

Advice, information and help



There needs to be good advice and help for parents so they can make the right choices about how to organise child support. Services should work together on this.



These services should be part of the system which supports parents who are splitting up or who do not live together. Parents can get support from:



- Sure Start and Children's Centres;



- extended schools;



- family support agencies;



- Jobcentre Plus;



- local authority advice centres; and



- Citizens Advice Bureau.



The system should be fair and easy for parents to understand. Information should be given out about child support with information about what it means to be a parent. Helping parents early may help them decide on the best way to support their children.



It is important to look at the best ways to tell parents about the new system so they do not lose out.



What should be done



Make sure that child support information is included in all advice services for parents. Government departments should work together to make this happen.

The new system

Under a new system there should be 3 ways for parents to organise child support:



1. Agreeing child support privately;



2. Making their agreement legal through a court; and



3. Using the Government service if they cannot or will not agree.

1. Private Agreements



What should be done

The system should allow parents to agree child support themselves.



By allowing parents to agree child support themselves they can sort things out in a way that is better for their situation. Parents are more likely to keep to this.



What should be done

The Government may only step in when parents cannot agree or when a parent is not paying what they should.

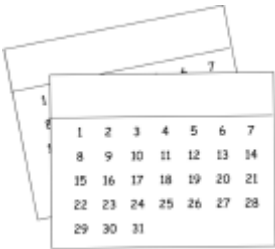
2. Legal Agreements



There should be a way for all parents to make their agreement legal if they can agree on child support. This is called a 'consent order'. Only parents who are not on benefits can do this.



Consent orders can be part of a divorce agreement.



At the moment the court deals with any problems or changes that come up with a 'consent order' in the first year. After that, parents can apply to the Child Support Agency.



What should be done



Consent orders should be dealt with by the court even after the 1st year. If you have a consent order, your maintenance will always be dealt with by the courts.

3. A Government Service



By allowing parents to make their own private agreements Government can spend more time looking at difficult cases.

The Government services will need to:



- find and contact parents who do not live with their children;



- work out how much parents should be paying and show people how this is worked out;



- collect money and pay it to the parent who lives with the child; and



- make sure that child support is being paid and take action if it isn't.



What should be done

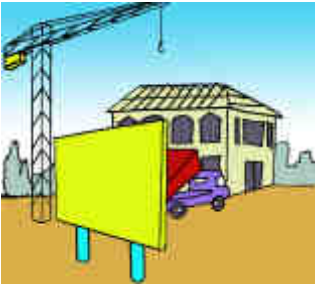
One part of the Government service should focus on taking action against parents who do not pay.



There should be new ways to make parents pay, such as taking away their passports.

6. Moving over to a new system

How should the new system be set up?



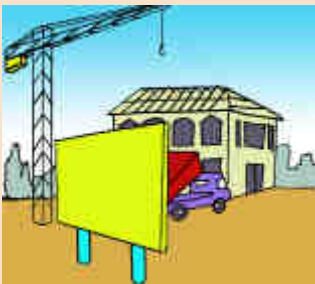
Changing over to a new system will not be easy.



The Government will need to change the way it works in child support. It will just work on the most difficult cases. It will give people information and advice and help them to find the services they need.



What should be done



A new child support organisation needs to be set up. This should be different to the Child Support Agency.



This organisation should plan and oversee the child support system. It should be able to ask other groups to help run the service. These could be private or public organisations.



Parents who already get child support will be able to apply to the new organisation, or they will be able to choose one of the other ways of organising child support – either a private or legal agreement.



Parents will be given help to apply to the new organisation if they want to.



While these changes are going on parents must carry on supporting their children. The Child Support Agency must make the service for parents better and make sure they pay what they should. Doing this will make the change-over easier.

What the organisation will need to do

The system must be made simpler.

The organisation will need to be good at:



- keeping track of parents who do not live with their children;



- working out how much parents should pay; and



- collecting child support money.



What should be done

DWP Department for
Work and Pensions

The Department for Work and Pensions should do more work on how best to plan and do these things.

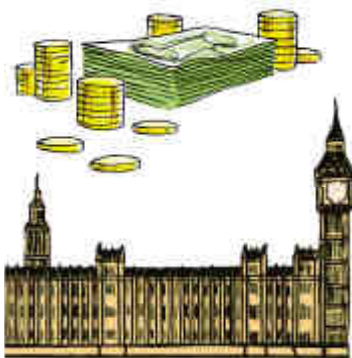
Charging for the new service



Making sure parents pay what they should is an important part of making sure the child support system works well.



This has not worked well in the past and some parents have felt that they could get away with not paying for what their children need.



The Government could make people pay for the new service. This might encourage more parents to agree child support themselves.



What should be done



The new organisation should have the power to ask parents to pay for the service.



Detailed plans should be written about this.



Outstanding debt



A lot of money is still owed under the old system. In April 2005 £3 billion was owed.




This needs sorting out but it should not be mixed up with the new organisation. Work has already started on this.



What should be done

A separate organisation should deal with any money that is still owed after closing cases. This should run for a limited time only.



7. Conclusion

This paper sets out the main ideas for changing the child support system:



- If people on benefits are allowed to keep more of the money they are given, more parents will be happy to pay child support. Then more children will get support;



- Fewer children will be poor. This is one of Government's aims; and



- Government will be able to work harder on more difficult cases.

What happens next?



- The next step should be to put together a plan for change and make it happen. Government departments need to work together on this, led by the Department for Work and Pensions.



- There needs to be a group of people called a Programme Board who will be in charge of the changes.



- Much more research and testing needs to be done so that the new system works well.

Credits



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