



Department
for Work &
Pensions

PAUL MAYNARD MP
Minister for Pensions

26 March 2024

Sir Stephen Timms MP

Delivered electronically

Dear Stephen,

Thank you for your valuable contributions at the Backbench Business debate on the Child Maintenance Service, in Westminster Hall on 27 February 2024. I was pleased to see such a well-attended debate. I committed to writing to you on any points raised that I did not have time to cover in my closing remarks. This letter is intended to fulfil that commitment.

I will first just reiterate the overall context of the issues we were discussing in the debate. Child maintenance payments can help to keep children out of poverty. Payments through both private and Child Maintenance Service arrangements were estimated to be on average £2.6bn a year in the financial years ending 2020 to 2022, helping keep 160,000 children out of poverty annually.

We've recently taken action to widen access to the Child Maintenance Service, and ensure more children get the best start in life. In February, we removed the £20 application fee so that more families, including the poorest, can access the support available through the Child Maintenance Service. We've also enabled the Child Maintenance Service to write off debt worth less than £7 in inactive cases, so it can focus on parents who owe larger sums.

We plan to bring in new powers to significantly speed up enforcement action so the Child Maintenance Service can recover unpaid maintenance through administrative liability orders, rather than go through a lengthy court process. We published our response to the consultation on 12 February 2024 and will bring forward legislation at the earliest opportunity.

This change will reduce the time taken to obtain a liability order from twenty-two weeks to as few as six weeks and ensure that existing tough action, such as forcing the sale of property or commitment to prison, can be considered much sooner.

You raised the single caseworker initiative for those customers experiencing domestic abuse and asked for an update on this.

In the Government response to the Independent Review on Domestic Abuse and the Work & Pensions Select Committee report on the Child Maintenance Service, we said we had launched a pilot for cases where there has been domestic abuse, providing customers with a single named caseworker. This pilot commenced in

January 2023 and is currently being evaluated. This will inform the future service offer for survivors of domestic abuse.

The Child Maintenance Service have been continuing to progress a multi-year modernisation programme to provide separated parents a greater level of online service, rather than requiring them to contact caseworkers directly. This includes understanding options around child maintenance arrangements, completing applications, and the ability to manage their case online. These online services are available 24/7.

The Child Maintenance Service are also continuing to improve the communications with customers, including greater use of SMS and email as well as improving letter content.

You also asked when legislation to include unearned income in the maintenance calculation is to be introduced.

There are a small number of parents whose maintenance liability is inconsistent with their financial resources. However, I would like to provide assurance that unearned income can be captured within the existing variations process.

Variations can be considered where a paying parent has certain categories of taxable income which are not captured by the standard child maintenance calculation. Parents can make a request to the Child Maintenance Service to have the calculation varied. If agreed, a variation can lead to an adjustment to the maintenance calculation.

In 2021, the Government consulted on proposals to include more types of taxable income held by HMRC within the standard maintenance calculation. These proposals are being considered alongside the calculation review. We will bring forward changes to improve the process to include unearned income within the maintenance calculation as soon as possible.

Finally, you asked whether changes to the Child Maintenance calculation will be made before the election.

The Government has committed to reviewing the calculation to make sure it is fit for purpose. We have begun the process to update the underlying research and consider how we ensure the calculation reflects current and future societal trends.

Any changes made to the child maintenance calculation will require amendments to primary and secondary legislation.

The calculation formula underpins every Child Maintenance Service case. Furthermore, those with private arrangements can use the online calculator to get an estimate to inform their own arrangement.

Therefore, it is essential we undertake a thorough and comprehensive review of the calculation formula and consider the potential impacts on parents and children. This

requires time to ensure we take an informed and co-ordinated approach to ensuring the calculation is fit for purpose and futureproofed.

As work progresses, we will continue to engage with stakeholders and outline timelines for our long-term strategy.

A copy of this letter has been deposited in the Libraries of the House.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Paul Maynard". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'P' and a long, sweeping underline.

Paul Maynard MP
Minister for Pensions