Customer views on service delivery in the Child Support Agency

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Research Report No. 74

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This research was commissioned to investigate further a range of issues identified in the last CSA national client survey carried out in 1995. It is a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with parents with care and absent parents. The research aimed to identify client satisfaction and dissatisfaction arising specifically from operational or staff activities. It was carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of York in Spring 1997.

The main findings are:

- Absent parents and parents with care accepted the principle of dual responsibility. Parents with care valued the recognition of the father's responsibilities and regular payments of maintenance.
- Although absent parents tended to agree with the Agency's aims, some thought they had been incorrectly implemented. The Agency was seen as pursuing 'soft targets' and thought to be ineffective in obtaining maintenance from absent parents who refused to comply.
- Overall people were left with an impression of an impersonal system consisting of forms, letters and, increasingly, telephone calls. The Agency was seen as lacking even handedness in ensuring that all absent parents paid maintenance.
- Many parents were dissatisfied with their assessment as they felt it was too high and therefore inaccurate. None of the parents were able to explain fully how their assessment had been calculated and many wanted to know the details of the formula used.
- There were mixed views on the forms used in the assessment, some found them easy to complete, while for others it was more difficult, but few had tried to use the help notes provided. There was some objection to having to provide information on partners income and the failure to ask about debt.
- Contact with the Agency was a source of dissatisfaction. Some parents disliked the tone of letters from the CSA, and many complained about delays and not being kept informed of progress. Very few parents in the study had had face-to-face contact with the CSA, but many said it would be their preferred method of contact.
- Although there were no cases of the absent parent giving up work as a result of involvement with the CSA, some reported no longer working overtime or looking for promotion, as they believed any extra income would go in maintenance payments. For parents with care there was a greater incentive to take employment when maintenance replaced Income Support, but if it was not regularly received, they had to live on a reduced amount of benefit.

Introduction
On behalf of the Child Support Agency (CSA), the Department of Social Security (DSS) commissioned the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York to undertake qualitative research to investigate further a range of issues identified in the CSA National Client Survey 1995 (Speed and Kent, 1996).

The study aimed to improve the Agency's understanding of the reasons for clients' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service offered by the Agency. The study also aimed to provide some suggestions which might improve the service offered. A further aim was to explore the use of a qualitative methodology in the investigation of client satisfaction.

The study is based on a series of 40 depth interviews with parents with care and absent parents, 20 in each group, including parents with different employment backgrounds, family circumstances and from rural and urban locations. A group discussion with eight parents with care was also included as a methodological study.

Understanding of the role of the CSA

Overall, parents were aware of the Agency's aims of ensuring that both parents should share responsibility for their children and agreed with it. APs tended to agree in principle with the aims, although several of them thought it had been incorrectly implemented and considered the Agency pursued 'soft targets'. The Agency was perceived as lacking even-handedness in ensuring that all APs paid maintenance.

Suspicion was expressed by both APs and PWCs that ex-partners were deceiving the CSA about their income; as a result relationships between them deteriorated. None of the parents were able to explain fully how their assessment had been calculated and many wanted to know the details of the formula that was used to calculate awards. The CSA was perceived as effective in obtaining maintenance from APs who were willing to pay, but ineffective at coping with those who refused to comply.

The process of assessment and payment of maintenance

First contact between APs and the CSA varied. The initial letter was sometimes perceived as threatening, especially when deadlines for payment and threats of attachment of earnings arrived simultaneously. Feelings about the initial contact with the CSA were less strong for PWCs. Some had expectations that the payments would be reliable. Others were reluctant to disturb previously satisfactory arrangements.

Reactions to the Maintenance Enquiry Form (MEF) were mixed, some finding it easy and others difficult to complete. There was some objection to having to provide information on their partner's income and the failure of the form to ask about debts. Some PWCs found the Maintenance Assessment Form (MAF) easy to complete; for others it was more difficult, but few used the help notes provided.

Many parents were dissatisfied with their assessment as they felt it was inaccurate, but it was difficult for them to judge accurately as they did not know how the formula was worked out. For PWCs the time taken
from completion of the form to receiving maintenance ranged from three weeks to over three years. (There was a clear gap between expected and actual times for many PWCs).

Some APs had complained to the CSA, mostly about the assessment. Others had wanted to complain but felt that there was no obvious, routine way to do so. Specific issues mentioned by APs when asked about their overall experience of the CSA included:

- treatment of overtime earnings, which was linked to a view that assessments were too high;
- rules about debt other than housing costs;
- allowances for travel and pensions contributions were judged to be insufficient;
- lack of information on the progress of their case; and
- having to continually explain changes in circumstance.
- For PWCs, dissatisfaction resulted from a combination of being poorly informed of progress, delays, too little money, complexity and uncertainty due to continuous re-assessments. A source of satisfaction mentioned was dealing with the CSA rather than the absent parent.

Communications

APs' views on the information provided by the CSA were mixed. Some found the leaflets helpful, while for others they were too basic or difficult to understand. Again, the majority said they would have liked details of the formula to be available.

PWCs were overall less interested than APs in reading the leaflets, and those that did understood them less well. This may be due to APs being more interested in knowing how their assessment was calculated. Some APs were dissatisfied with the tone of letters from the CSA. Both APs and PWCs frequently mentioned that the Agency did not acknowledge receipt of their letters.

Problems with telephoning the Agency included difficulty getting through and the length of time involved in actually making contact with the appropriate person. Both APs and PWCs complained that they never spoke to the same person twice and therefore had to repeat the details of their case at every telephone call. APs disliked being telephoned at work, and some APs found evening telephone calls intrusive.

Very few parents in the study had face-to-face contact with the CSA, but many said it would be their preferred method of contact, as they would be able to ask questions more easily.

Outcomes for children, relationships with current and ex-partners and employment

Relationships between former and current families tended to deteriorate as a result of the demands for maintenance from the CSA. Relationships with former and current partners were also affected because of the way involvement with the CSA dominated their lives.
Some APs resented not being able to afford to buy presents or pay for outings for their children from a previous relationship because of the amount of maintenance they were paying. They felt the children were ultimately worse off both socially and materially.

In some cases PWCs used the threat of withdrawing access as a way of ensuring compliance from the absent parent. There was also some anxiety that because the AP was providing money for the household he had a right of entry to the home.

None of the APs had given up work as a result of involvement of the CSA, but some no longer worked overtime or looked for promotion, as any extra income would go in maintenance payments.

For PWCs there was a greater incentive to take employment when maintenance replaced Income Support, but when it was not received regularly the PWC and child had to live on an income lower than their normal benefit.

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**Overall satisfaction and dissatisfaction**

For parents with care a good service would include regular payments of maintenance, regular information on how their case was progressing and efficient handling of telephone calls.

Absent parents wanted to understand how the maintenance assessment was calculated to ensure accuracy. They also wanted a speedier process so that arrears did not build up and less assumption of unwillingness to pay.

There was also some criticism of the rules of assessment, mainly the lack of flexibility for individual cases and the way in which self-employed earnings were assessed.

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**Improving customer satisfaction - recommendations**

Suggestions for improving service included: reliability of payment; information on the progress of their case; acknowledgement of all correspondence; dealing with one named team; face-to-face contact; and an efficient telephone service.

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**Relevant publications**