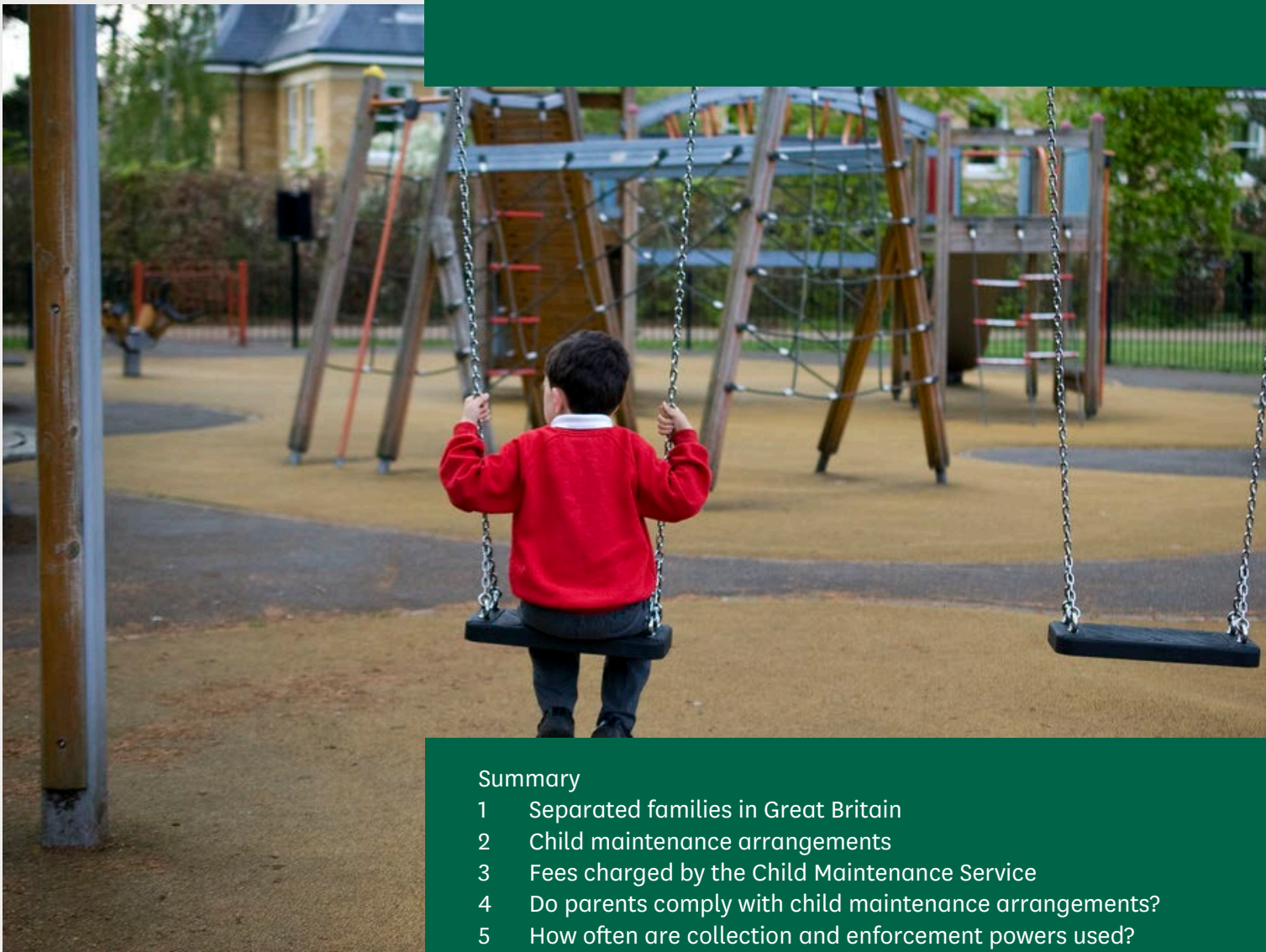


Research Briefing

18 December 2024

By Niamh Foley

Child Maintenance Service statistics



Summary

- 1 Separated families in Great Britain
- 2 Child maintenance arrangements
- 3 Fees charged by the Child Maintenance Service
- 4 Do parents comply with child maintenance arrangements?
- 5 How often are collection and enforcement powers used?
- 6 Northern Ireland

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Summary

In the most recent statistics which cover the 2022/23 financial year, the [Department for Work and Pensions estimated there were 2.4 million separated families](#) in Great Britain, and 3.8 million children living in separated families.

Around 59% of separated families were estimated to have a child maintenance arrangement. The Child Maintenance Service was the sole organiser of maintenance for around 16% of separated families.

This briefing sets out statistics for the Child Maintenance Service which operates in England, Scotland and Wales. Section 5 provides statistics on the similar, but separate, scheme in Northern Ireland.

What is child maintenance?

[Parents have financial responsibility](#) for their children, even if they are separated. Child maintenance is a financial arrangement between a parent a child does not normally live with (the paying parent) and the person who lives with the child and who usually provides day-to-day care for them (the person with care).

It is not compulsory to have a formal child maintenance arrangement. Separated parents can arrange child maintenance themselves under a 'family-based arrangement'. Where parents cannot agree, maintenance can be arranged through the government's statutory service: the Child Maintenance Service.

The statistics below refer to the arrangements made through the Child Maintenance Service.

How many people are using the Child Maintenance Service?

The [Department for Work and Pensions publishes quarterly figures on Child Maintenance Service arrangements](#). In the quarter ending September 2024, there were around 678,000 paying parents on Child Maintenance Service arrangements. Note, a paying parent can have multiple child maintenance arrangements. For the same quarter, there were around 1,025,000 children covered.

Do paying parents comply with child maintenance?

The default option is for a case to be placed on the Child Maintenance Service's direct pay service. This is where the service calculates the rate at which maintenance should be paid, but payments are made between parents.

The other service available is collect and pay, where the Child Maintenance Service additionally collects and passes on payments. If payments are missed under direct pay, the person with care must inform the Child Maintenance Service, and a case may be moved to collect and pay. If payments are missed under collect and pay, the service will act, and the person with care does not need to report it.

As the service is involved in the entire transaction for collect and pay, it has information on whether these payments are made in full and on time. Of the arrangements on collect and pay, [68% of parents contributed a form of payment](#) in the quarter ending September 2024. The Department for Work and Pensions defines this as compliance.

For the direct pay service, there is less information on how these arrangements work in practice after the initial calculation. The Department for Work and Pensions conducted [a survey of direct pay users between 2017 and 2019](#). It found three months after a direct pay calculation, 85% of parents with care said they either had or were setting up a child maintenance arrangement. This fell to 81% after 13 months from the calculation.

How often are enforcement powers used?

There is a spectrum of powers available to the Child Maintenance Service to collect arrears. These are either collection actions (measures the service can take under its own initiative), or enforcement powers (measures that can only be taken when the service obtains a "liability order" from the court).

The [number of deduction orders](#) (either a lump sum or regular deductions that are made from bank accounts) in process for the quarter ending September 2024 reached 5,100 collecting £4.1m. In the same quarter, the total number of paying parents using the collect and pay service with a deduction from earnings order or deduction from earnings request was around 56,600, of which 85% were compliant.

Also in the quarter ending September 2024, there were [140 prison sentences, one passport confiscation and two driving licence disqualifications in relation to unpaid maintenance](#) in England and Wales. In Scotland for the same quarter, there were two driving licence disqualifications.

1 Separated families in Great Britain

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) publishes [annual estimates of the separated families population](#) and their child maintenance arrangements.

A separated family is defined as having one resident parent, one non-resident parent and any biological or adopted children either under 16, or under 20 and in full-time, non-tertiary education.¹

In Great Britain, a parent is legally responsible for maintaining their child, even if they do not live with the other parent or have no contact with the child. Parents can agree a private child maintenance arrangement themselves, called a family-based arrangement (this is sometimes known as a non-statutory arrangement). If they cannot reach an agreement, child maintenance can be arranged through the government's statutory Child Maintenance Service (CMS)- a statutory arrangement.

Successive governments have sought to use the CMS to encourage and support parents to make family-based arrangements, when they are able to do so.² It is not compulsory to have a formal maintenance arrangement, and some parents choose to make alternative arrangements, such as in-kind contributions or sharing care.³

In the most recent statistics for the 2022/23 financial year, the DWP estimated there were 2.4 million separated families in Great Britain, and 3.8 million children living in separated families.⁴

As shown in the chart below, around 41% of separated families were estimated to have no maintenance arrangement. The CMS was the sole organiser of maintenance for around 16% of separated families. 4% had a mixture of statutory and non-statutory arrangements. Informal, non-statutory arrangements include voluntary financial arrangements, payments in kind, shared care arrangements, and court orders requiring payments.⁵

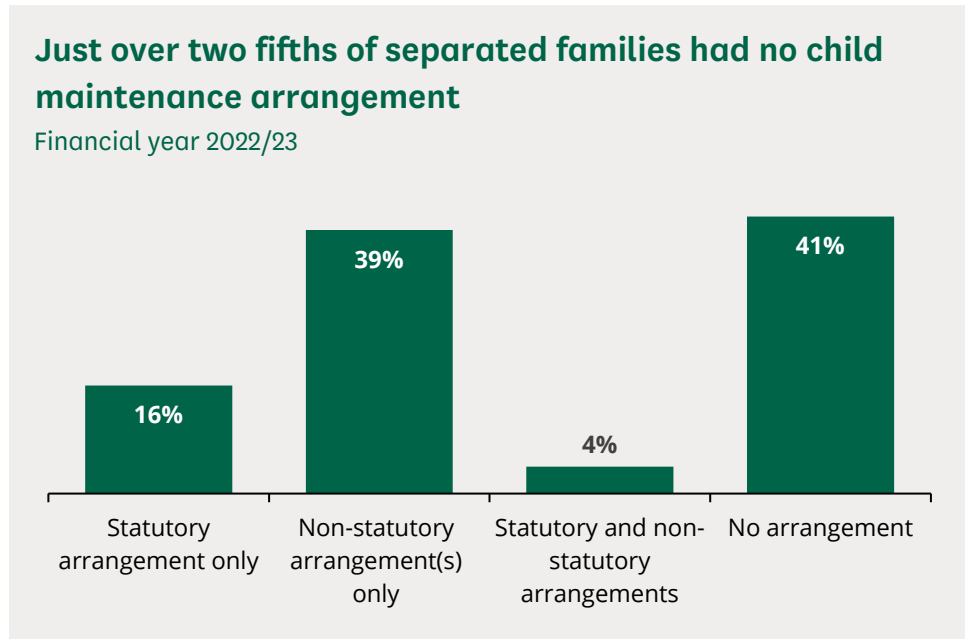
¹ DWP, [Separated families population statistics: April 2014 to March 2022 \(experimental\)](#), 23 March 2023, section 3

² DWP, [A new system of child maintenance](#), December 2006, paras 15, 39-40; DWP, [Strengthening families, promoting parental responsibility: The future of child maintenance \(PDF\)](#), CM 7990, January 2011, paras 5-15

³ DWP, [Relationship separation and child support study](#), No. 503, 2008, ch4; DWP and Government Social Research, [Long-term separated parents: Developing support to encourage child maintenance arrangements](#), 2015, ch3

⁴ DWP, [Separated families statistics: April 2014 to March 2023](#), 21 March 2024, section 2

⁵ DWP, [Separated families statistics: April 2014 to March 2023](#), 21 March 2024, table 2



Source: DWP, [Separated families statistics: April 2014 to March 2023](#), 21 March 2024, table 2

On average across the financial years ending 2021 to 2023, around £2.8 billion in child maintenance payments was received by parents/ people with care. £0.9 billion of this was through statutory arrangements.⁶

This data should be treated with some caution because there is limited information recorded by the CMS for payments made via direct pay arrangements. Estimates of income from non-statutory arrangements are drawn from the Family Resources Survey.

People/parents with care of the child are overwhelmingly female: 87% in the three financial years ending 2020 to 2022.⁷

⁶ [As above](#), table 4

⁷ [As above](#), table 3a

2

Child maintenance arrangements

Child maintenance is a financial arrangement between a parent a child does not normally live with (the non-resident parent or paying parent) and the person who lives with the child and who usually provides day-to-day care for them (the person with care).

It is not compulsory to have a formal child maintenance arrangement: separated parents can arrange child maintenance themselves under a ‘family-based arrangement’.

Where parents cannot agree, maintenance can be arranged through the government's statutory service, the Child Maintenance Service (CMS). The calculation made by the CMS is supposed to reflect the amount the paying parent would spend if the child lived with them.⁸

The statistics below refer to the arrangements made through the CMS.

Box 1: Statutory child support schemes

There are currently three statutory child support schemes operating in Great Britain under the Child Support Act 1991 (as amended):

- The 2012 scheme: the current scheme and open to new applicants. It is administered by the Child Maintenance Service (CMS).
- The 1993 and 2003 schemes: these schemes are closed to new applicants. All cases with ongoing maintenance liabilities have been transferred to the 2012 scheme. Only “arrears-only” cases continue to operate on the legacy schemes although the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is implementing a large-scale write-off of arrears that accrued under these schemes. These legacy schemes are administered by the Child Support Agency (CSA). More information on this can be found in [Library briefing on the write-off of arrears on CSA cases](#).

⁸ PQ 39916 [on [Children: Maintenance](#)], 17 June 2016

2.1

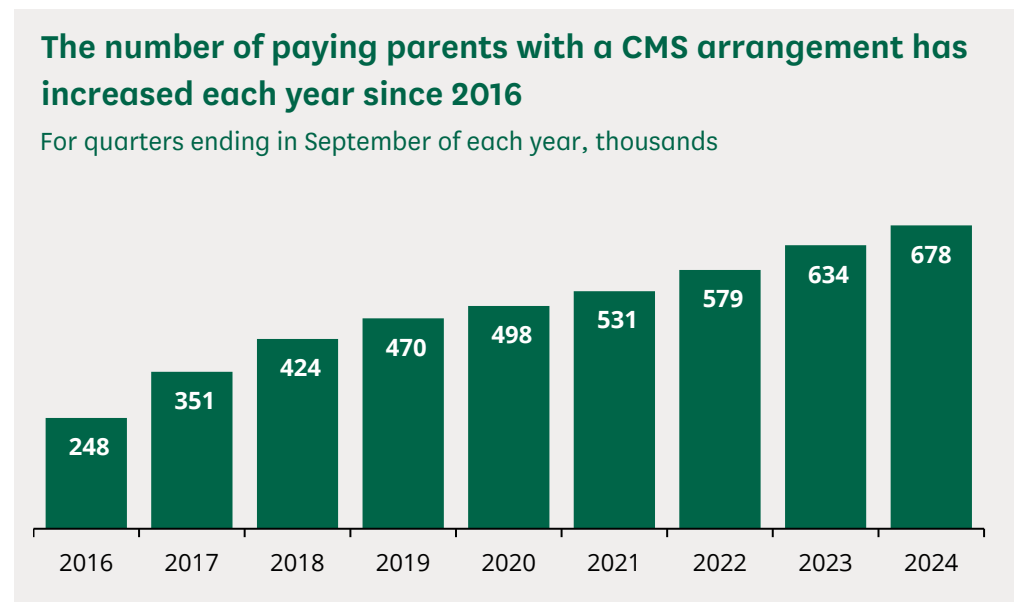
Number of paying parents and children

Number of paying parents

There were around 678,000 paying parents for the quarter ending in September 2024 on CMS arrangements.⁹ This was around 3.5 times higher than in March 2016 when current records began, and 1.4 times higher than September 2019.

As shown in the chart below, the number of paying parents with an arrangement through the CMS has increased each year for the quarters ending in September from 2016 to 2024.

Note, a paying parent can have multiple child maintenance arrangements.



Notes: [Figures rounded](#) to the nearest thousand. Paying parents can have multiple child maintenance arrangements. Parents who have no ongoing liability are still included in the caseload if arrears are still due, as well as parents who meet specific requirements and do not need to pay child maintenance (being on the nil rate).

Source: DWP, [Stat-Xplore: Paying parents](#), 17 December 2024, table 1

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has said some of the increase in applications were due to those who previously used the Child Support Agency (CSA):

Some applications to the CMS are from parents who previously had an arrangement with the Child Support Agency... [where] cases with an ongoing liability were closed by December 2018. Parents were then encouraged to make a new family-based arrangement or an arrangement through the CMS.

⁹ DWP, [Stat-Xplore: Paying parents](#), 17 December 2024, table 1

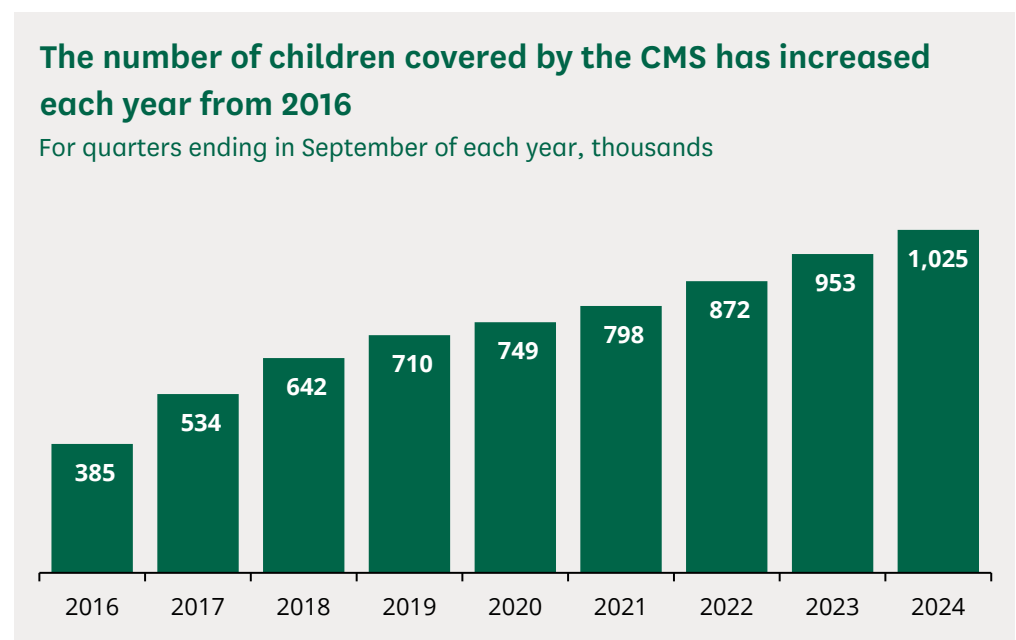
The CMS may still receive applications from parents who previously used the CSA, as they may have had a family-based arrangement in the interim.¹⁰

Noting the increase in applications to the CMS in June 2022, the government said increases in the cost-of-living may be causing more parents with care to seek a formal arrangement:

In the quarter to June 22 [2022], 32,000 new applications were made which is a 64% increase in applications compared to December 2021... The impact of the cost-of-living crisis may be influencing parents with care to apply in higher volumes as they seek more formal arrangements to receive regular child maintenance.¹¹

Number of children

Around 1,025,000 million children at the end of June 2024 were covered by CMS arrangements.¹² This is 3.3 times higher than March 2016, and 1.4 times higher than September 2019. As shown in the chart below, the total number of children covered by the CMS has increased every year for the quarters ending in September from 2016 to 2024.



Notes: Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand. Includes some children associated with active arrangements for which no ongoing child maintenance was due in the quarter (arrears only cases).

Source: DWP, [StatXplore: CMS Children](#), 17 December 2024, table 1

Information on [who is a child under child maintenance](#) is available in a Commons Library constituency casework article.

¹⁰ DWP, [CMS statistics: data to December 2022](#), 28 March 2023, section 4

¹¹ PQ 77415 [on [Children: Maintenance](#)], 11 November 2022

¹² DWP, [StatXplore: CMS children](#), 17 December 2024, table 1

National Audit Office report

When the government introduced the 2012 scheme (see box 1 above), some reforms were made to reduce government intervention by default, encouraging collaboration between separated parents. These reforms included the introduction of charges to use the service. The purpose of the CMS was to help the “minority of separated families that seek assistance from government”.¹³

In March 2022, the National Audit Office ([NAO](#)) [published a report on child maintenance](#). The NAO found in comparison to the previous child maintenance schemes, the proportion of separated families relying on the state to help them make maintenance arrangements has reduced, which was an aim of the reforms:

It [the DWP] had hoped in 2012 that take-up of family-based arrangements would rise from 29% to 35% of separated families. It estimates that by 2019-20 it had risen more than expected to 38%. The Department aimed for a corresponding fall in the take up of the statutory scheme from 46% in 2011-12 to 33% by 2019. The actual proportion reduced by much more: an estimated 18% of separated families used the CMS scheme in 2019-20.

However, the NAO also noted that there has also been an increase in separated families with no maintenance arrangement (25% of separated families in 2011-12 to 44% in 2019-20).¹⁴

As a result, the report said, there has “been no clear change” in the number of families with effective child maintenance arrangements (including arrangements not through the CMS) since the government had reformed the system in 2012. The NAO estimated one in three separated families in Great Britain had a child maintenance arrangement where the agreed maintenance was paid in full.¹⁵

The report added the aim of increasing the number of effective maintenance arrangements overall was based on a wider cross-government set of policy agendas on separated families. However, this “broader set of cross-government actions had yet to emerge in the way envisioned.”¹⁶

2.2

How quickly are applications processed by the CMS?

The CMS aims to process 80% of applications within 6 weeks.

¹³ NAO, [Child maintenance](#), HC 1139, 3 March 2022, Background to the report

¹⁴ NAO, [Child maintenance](#) (PDF), HC 1139, 3 March 2022, para 1.11

¹⁵ NAO, [Child maintenance: summary](#) (PDF), HC 1139, 3 March 2022, para 12-13

¹⁶ [As above](#), para 14

The day the CMS receives an application will be the day it is recorded as having been made. An application will be considered cleared when either:

- a) the amount of child maintenance to be paid has been calculated and an arrangement to pay maintenance between the two parents has been agreed.
- b) the amount of child maintenance to be paid has been calculated as zero; or
- c) the child maintenance application has been closed.¹⁷

The government notes the service's ability to trace and confirm the identity of the paying parent has the biggest impact on the time taken to complete an application.

Data published by the DWP suggests that of the 38,800 applications in the three months to June 2024, 74% were cleared within six weeks. Relevant data for the quarter ending September 2024 is not yet available.¹⁸

During the quarter ending in June 2020, clearance times were affected by the coronavirus outbreak, and 44% were cleared within 6 weeks.¹⁹

2.3

Shared care arrangements

If a child stays overnight with the paying parent, this is called shared care in child maintenance literature. If shared care happens for an average of one night a week or more (at least 52 nights a year), this can affect child maintenance payments.

In each quarter since the one ending in December 2021, 76% of statutory maintenance arrangements did not have an arrangement for shared care.²⁰

As shown in the chart below, in the quarter ending September 2024 of the 24% of cases with a shared care arrangement, around 55% of these saw a child spend one night a week with the paying parent. For the same period around 30% spend two nights and 10% spent three nights with the paying parent. Around 5% of arrangements saw a child spend, on average, an equal number of nights with each parent. An equal number of nights is defined as 175 nights a year.²¹

The [Library briefing on how child maintenance is calculated](#) and the [constituency casework article how shared care affects a child maintenance calculation](#) provides information on how a shared care affects a calculation.

¹⁷ PQ 6825 [on [Children: Maintenance](#)], 19 December 2023

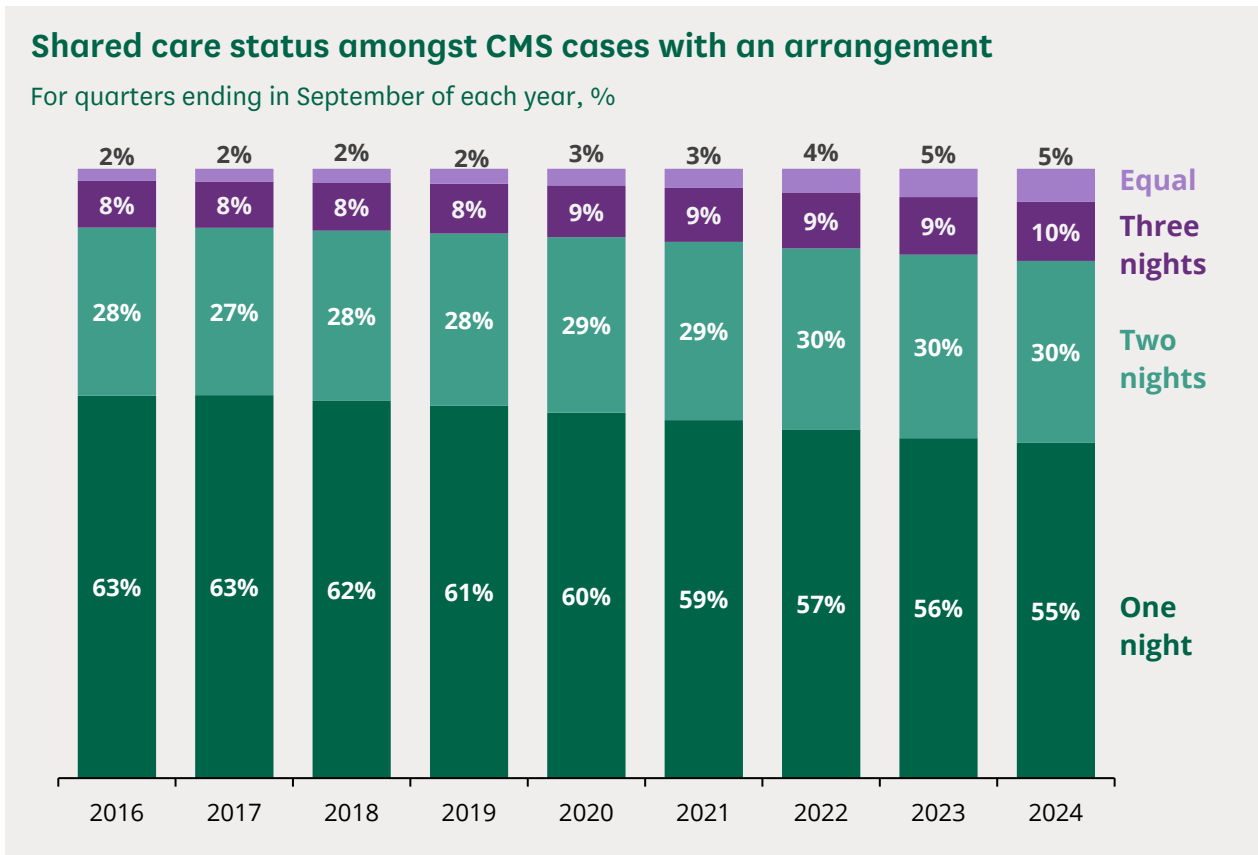
¹⁸ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 1

¹⁹ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to June 2021](#), 28 September 2021, table 1

²⁰ DWP, [Stat-Xplore: CMS children: Shared care status by quarter](#), 17 December 2024

²¹ Where an arrangement covers multiple children, the level of shared care is not necessarily equal for all the children. In these figures, the recorded status refers to the maximum amount of shared care used within the arrangement: DWP, [StatXplore: Shared care status by quarter](#), 17 December 2024

It is also available in the [DWP factsheet on how a child's living arrangements can affect child maintenance](#).



Source: DWP, [Stat-Xplore: CMS Arrangements, Shared care status by quarter](#), 17 December 2024, table 3

3 Fees charged by the Child Maintenance Service

Information on [the fees charged by the Child Maintenance Service \(CMS\) when making an arrangement](#) can be found in a separate Library casework article.

3.1 Application fee exemptions

Income from £20 application fee

2014/15 to 2021/22

2014/15	£0.83m
2015/16	£1.69m
2016/17	£1.80m
2017/18	£1.51m
2018/19	£0.97m
2019/20	£0.75m
2020/21	£0.61m
2021/22	£0.70m

Source: [PQ 281114 \[on Child Maintenance Service\]](#), 23 July 2019; [PQ 140842 \[on CMS: Fees and Charges\]](#), 20 January 2021; [PQ 188709 \[on Children: Maintenance\]](#), 14 June 2023

Previously, those who applied to the CMS for it to calculate maintenance amounts had to pay an application fee of £20, unless they were:

- aged 18 or younger
- a victim of domestic abuse or violence

On 26 February 2024, new regulations came into force which removed the £20 fee for all CMS applicants.²² More information can be found in a [Library insight on the removal of the application fee for the CMS](#).

In 2021/22, the total income from the £20 application fee was £0.70m.²³

Exemption from the application fee

The chart below shows the percentage of new CMS applicants that received application fee exemptions. In the quarter ending March 2024, prior to the fee being removed on 26 February 2024, 54% (17,600) of new applicants were exempt from the £20 fee.

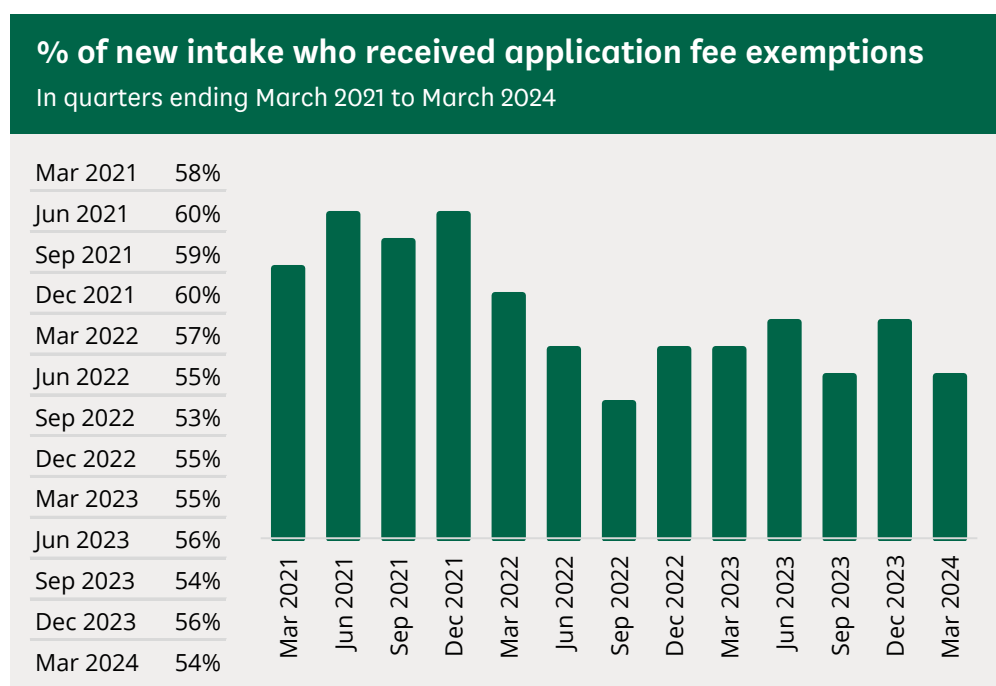
Of the 54% of applicants exempt from the fee, 98% (17,600) were exempt because of domestic abuse.²⁴ Information on [the support available for victims of domestic abuse when applying for child maintenance](#) can be found in a separate Library briefing.²⁵

²² [Child Support \(Management of Payments and Arrears and Fees\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2024 \(SI 2024/87\)](#)

²³ [PQ 188709 \[on Children: Maintenance\]](#), 14 June 2023

²⁴ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to March 2024](#), 25 June 2024, table 2

²⁵ Commons Library briefing CBP09661, [Child maintenance: Support for victims of domestic abuse](#)



Source: DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to March 2024](#), 25 June 2024, table 2

In response to a parliamentary question on the number of victims of domestic abuse using the CMS, the government explained it was looking at ways to provide statistics on this, now application fee exemption statistics are no longer published:

The Department [for Work and Pensions] is assessing how it can provide statistics on domestic abuse now the application fee exemption statistics are no longer published. The Department's Chief Statistician will oversee the development of these statistics to make sure they meet the Code of Practice for Statistics.²⁶

3.2 Income from collection fees

For those under direct pay, where the CMS calculates the rate of maintenance and payments are made directly between parents, there are no additional collection fees charged by the CMS.

For those using collect and pay, the paying parent must pay an extra 20% of the child maintenance due and the parent with care receives 96% of the child maintenance paid by the paying parent (paying a fee of 4%). This is a recurring fee, paid each time child maintenance is paid. The DWP provides the following example:

A maintenance liability is calculated as £100 per month. The PWC [person with care] collection charge is £4 per month and the NRP [non-resident parent] collection charge is £20 per month. The NRP's payment schedule is then set up as £120 per month. When the monthly payment of £120 is received, £20 is

²⁶ PQ 4855 [on [Child Maintenance Service: Domestic Abuse](#)], 17 September 2024

allocated to the NRP collection charge, £100 to maintenance paid. £4 is then allocated to the PWC collection charge and £96 is passed to the PWC.²⁷

The DWP has stated that making both parents liable for collection fees creates “an ongoing incentive for both parents to move their case into direct pay, where collection fees do not apply”.²⁸

The table below shows the income from collection fees under collect and pay. In 2021/22, the total income was £46.02 million, of which £38.53 million was from the paying parent (paying the 20% fee).²⁹

Income from collection fees under collect and pay			
2014/15 to 2021/22			
	Paying parent (20% fee)	Receiving parent (4% fee)	Total
2014/15	£1.65m	£0.33m	£1.97m
2015/16	£5.57m	£1.09m	£6.66m
2016/17	£10.49m	£2.03m	£12.52m
2017/18	£16.88m	£3.24m	£20.12m
2018/19	£27.91m	£5.43m	£33.34m
2019/20	£34.77m	£6.77m	£41.54m
2020/21	£34.25m	£6.70m	£40.94m
2021/22	£38.53m	£7.50m	£46.02m

Source: PQ 281113 [[on CMS](#)], 23 July 2019; PQ 25685 [[on CMS](#)], 5 March 2020; PQ 140842 [[on CMS: Fees and Charges](#)], 20 January 2021; PQ 188709 [[on Children: Maintenance](#)], 14 June 2023

²⁷ DWP, [Impact assessment – The Child Support Fees Regulations 2014](#) (PDF), 31 March 2013, p12, para 72

²⁸ DWP, [Government response to the consultation supporting separated families: securing children’s futures](#) (PDF), Cm8742, November 2013, p14, para 8

²⁹ PQ 188709 [[on Children: Maintenance](#)], 14 June 2023

4 Do parents comply with child maintenance arrangements?

The default option for a child maintenance case is for it to be placed onto the Child Maintenance Service's (CMS) "direct pay" service. This is where the CMS calculates the rate at which maintenance should be paid, but payments are made between parents.

The other service available is collect and pay, where the CMS additionally collects and passes on payments. If payments are missed under direct pay, the person with care must inform the CMS of this, and a case may be moved to collect and pay. If payments are missed under collect and pay, the CMS will act, and the person with care does not need to report it.

As the CMS is involved in the entire transaction for collect and pay, it has information on whether these payments are made in full and on time. For the direct pay service, as payments are made directly between parents, there is less information on how these arrangements work in practice after the initial calculation.

4.1 Compliance rates

At the end of September 2024, the CMS was managing 750,000 arrangements for 680,000 paying parents (a parent may be liable to pay more than one arrangement). This is an 8% increase to the number of arrangements since the end of September 2023.³⁰

Collect and pay

Excluding those arrangements not yet assigned to a scheme, 290,000 (39%) were on collect and pay in September 2024. The proportion of arrangements assigned to collect and pay was 30% in March 2017 and this rose gradually to 37% in December 2019. Since then, the proportion of cases on collect and pay has remained between 36% and 39%.³¹

³⁰ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, section 3

³¹ Excluding those not assigned to either direct pay or collect and pay; DWP Stat-Xplore, [Child Maintenance, Table 1- Service Type & Paying status by quarter](#), June 2023; DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to March 2024](#), 25 June 2024, section 4

As shown in the graph below, 68% of parents on collect and pay contributed a form of payment in the quarter ending September 2024.³² The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) defines this as compliance. In the previous quarter, ending in June 2024, compliance was 69%.

Impact of Covid-19

The compliance rate for the quarter ending June 2020 is not directly comparable to previous quarters. The rate for June 2020 has been inflated because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The UK Government decided to pay all child maintenance liabilities for parents who normally paid via deductions from their Universal Credit benefit payment, between 10 April and 9 May 2020.

The DWP said deduction from benefit cases typically account for 21% to 24% of all paying parents. For June and September 2020 this increased to 39% and 40%, respectively, due to the coronavirus outbreak which saw more movement of people onto benefits.³³ These individuals were more likely to contribute some maintenance as deductions are made automatically, affecting the compliance rate.³⁴

The DWP said “this effect is likely to persist over an extended time period”.³⁵ In all quarters since, deduction from benefits cases accounted for over 30% of all paying parents.

³² DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, section 3

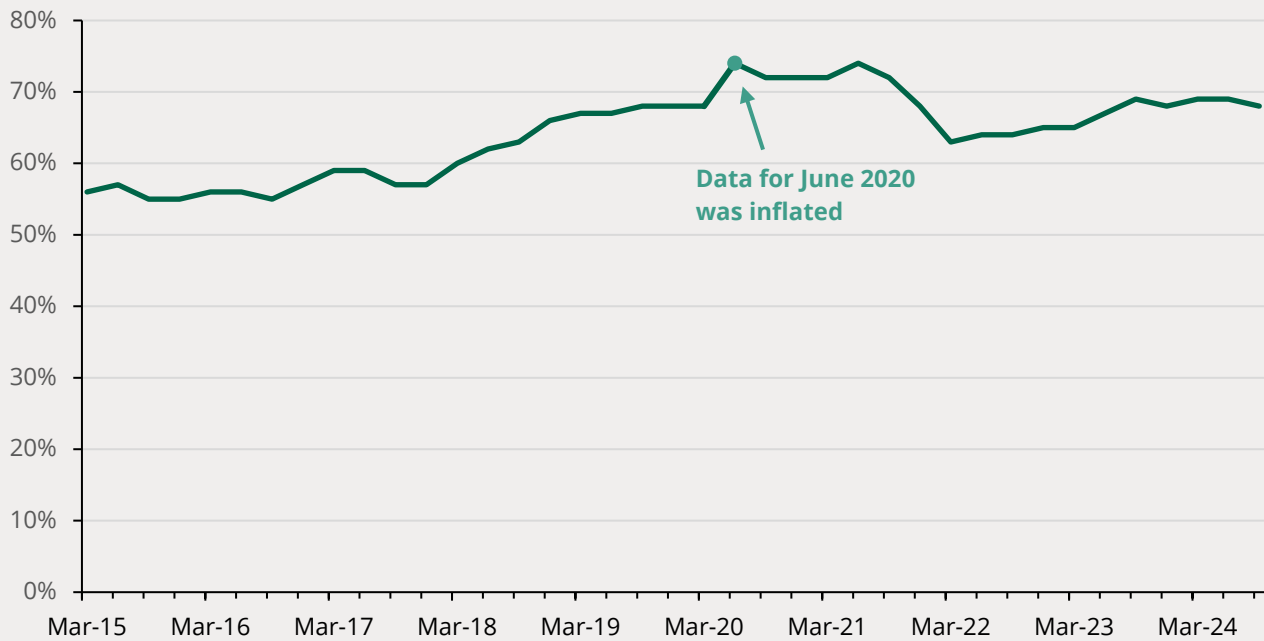
³³ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2022](#), 13 December 2022, section 7

³⁴ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: Data to June 2020](#), 30 September 2020; DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: Data to September 2022](#), 13 December 2022

³⁵ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to December 2020](#), 23 April 2021

Compliance on collect and pay

Proportion of paying parents on collect and pay who paid some child maintenance during the previous three months, %



Note: The compliance rate for the quarter ending June 2020 has been inflated and is not directly comparable to previous quarters due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Source: DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, section 6

Direct pay

A [survey report published by the DWP on compliance with direct pay arrangements](#) in 2016 found that of all receiving parents who had a direct pay calculation, 49% had an “effective arrangement” after three months. This rose to 53% after 13 months. An effective arrangement was defined as “payments were being made on time, in full and the receiving parent perceived the arrangement to be working well”.³⁶

This means 51% of parents at three months and 47% at 13 months who had a direct pay calculation were not successful in establishing a working arrangement and did not move on to collect and pay. Surveyed parents gave several reasons for deciding not to change to collect and pay, including that they believed the non-resident parent would not pay (48%), that the other parent could not afford to pay (13%), there was a domestic violence issue (11%), or that they had made alternative arrangements (10%).³⁷

To build on the information from the 2016 study, the DWP conducted another survey of direct pay users between 2017 and 2019. It published the report in July 2022. The study found three months after a direct pay calculation, 85% of

³⁶ DWP, [Survey of Child Maintenance Service direct pay clients](#) (PDF), December 2016, p67

³⁷ [As above](#) (PDF), p96, figure 7.4

parents with care said they either had or were setting up a child maintenance arrangement. This fell to 81% after 13 months from the calculation. In terms of the arrangements for these parents:

- 69% had an ongoing direct pay arrangement after three months (58% after 13 months),
- 14% were on or moving to collect and pay after three months (16% after 13 months), and
- 1% were moving to a family based or court-mandated arrangement (7% after 13 months).³⁸

National Audit Office report

The 2022 National Audit Office (NAO) report (see section 2.1 above) said [for direct pay, the CMS does not monitor whether payments](#) are being made but does prompt parents to contact them if the arrangement is not working. It found “around half of new Direct Pay arrangements are either not sustained or are not effective [...] meanwhile, unpaid maintenance arrears build up”. The report said in the quarter ending September 2021, paying parents moving from direct pay onto collect and pay owed on average £1,100 (“around five months’ worth of maintenance”).³⁹

Regarding compliance with collect and pay arrangements, the report noted the percentage of paying parents contributing more than 90% of ongoing maintenance due in a quarter had increased from 31% in March 2016 to 49% in September 2021. It added, however, “many parents” fail to pay everything owed, or pay their maintenance late:

In the quarter to September 2021, 39% of children under Collect & Pay arrangements received no ongoing maintenance or arrears. Some payments are made late within the quarter. As at September 2021, 38,000 paying parents (around one in four) with an ongoing arrangement had not paid any maintenance on their Collect & Pay arrangement for more than three months, and 22,000 (around one in seven) had not paid for more than six months.⁴⁰

4.2

Total arrears

The table below shows the growth in cumulative arrears. The compliance rate has been inflated for the June 2020 quarter because of the coronavirus outbreak, for the reasons stated in section 4.1.

At the end of September 2024, total cumulative arrears were at £682.1m. Arrears under the 2012 scheme (see section 2 above) account for 8% of the

³⁸ DWP, [Direct pay research 2017 to 2019](#), 14 July 2022

³⁹ NAO, [Child maintenance: summary](#) (PDF), HC 1139, 3 March 2022, para 20

⁴⁰ [As above](#) (PDF), para 21

total child maintenance/ child support that should have been paid by that date.

Child maintenance arranged in the 2012 CMS Scheme

For quarters ending in September of each year, £million

Cumulative figures by the end of	Child maintenance that should have been paid			Unpaid and now needing to be collected through collect and pay	
	Total due	Of which: Collection arrangement		£million	% of total due
		Direct pay	Collect and pay		
Sep-2015	264.1	175.5	88.7	38.1	14%
Sep-2016	635.0	453.1	181.9	82.4	13%
Sep-2017	1,250.9	919.0	331.9	154.2	12%
Sep-2018	2,081.7	1,527.8	553.9	240.8	12%
Sep-2019	3,045.8	2,235.5	810.3	315.3	10%
Sep-2020	4,069.6	3,006.2	1,063.4	379.7	9%
Sep-2021	5,136.9	3,812.2	1,324.8	435.9	8%
Sep-2022	6,283.5	4,657.9	1,625.7	512.6	8%
Sep-2023	7,578.3	5,625.5	1,952.8	590.2	8%
Sep-2024	9,015.3	6,685.0	2,330.3	682.1	8%

Source: DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 5

Maintenance that is “unpaid and now needing to be collected” includes unpaid maintenance under direct pay arrangements, child maintenance accumulated before the first payment was due, unpaid maintenance due to differences between the date when payments are due and paid, and overdue maintenance due under collect and pay.

5

How often are collection and enforcement powers used?

There is a spectrum of powers available to the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) to collect arrears, which are either:

- Collection actions: measures that the CMS can take under its own initiative
- Enforcement powers: measures that can only be taken when the CMS obtains a “liability order” from the court.

Before taking enforcement or collection action on unpaid child maintenance, the CMS must have issued the paying parent with an arrears notice in the last 12 months and come to no arrangement over repayment.⁴¹

The CMS charges collection fees to the paying parent for regular deduction orders (£50), deductions from earnings requests or orders (£50), lump sum deduction orders (£200) as well as liability orders (£300).⁴²

More information can be found in the [Library briefing on child maintenance arrears and enforcement](#).

Box 2: Enforcement action during the Coronavirus outbreak

Due to the Coronavirus outbreak, during the quarter ending June 2020, the CMS suspended the initiation of new enforcement action. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) said this reflected the need to redeploy staff and the pausing of business by its enforcement partners (eg Courts and bailiffs).⁴³

Caution should be taken when making comparisons with the June 2020 quarter. The DWP said for the September 2020 quarter, “the statistics continue to reflect the return to normal pre-COVID-19 levels of service delivery and include clearing any backlogs that may have built up during the height of the pandemic”.⁴⁴

⁴¹ [The Child Support \(Management of Payment and Arrears\) Regulations 2009](#), Section 3A; Voice of Child, [CMS: DEOs and Request: Decision making guidance](#) (PDF), u.d, p1 (accessed 13 August 2024)

⁴² PQ 61360 [on [Children: Maintenance](#)], 19 October 2022

⁴³ PQ 84290 [on [Children: Maintenance](#)], 7 September 2020

⁴⁴ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service Statistics: data to September 2020](#), 16 December 2020

5.1

Collection powers

As shown in the chart below, the number of deduction orders in process for the quarter ending September 2024 reached 5,100, collecting £4.1million. This was made up of 600 lump sum deductions, and 4,500 regular deductions, collecting £1.4million and £2.7million, respectively.

A deduction order is either a lump sum or regular deductions are made from bank accounts.

The total number of deduction orders is slightly higher than the same quarter in 2023, when there were 4,900 deduction orders in process, collecting £4.1million.

Number and value of deduction orders in process						
For quarters ending in September of each year						
Quarter ending	Lump Sum		Regular Deduction		Total	
	Number	Collected (£million)	Number	Collected (£million)	Number	Collected (£million)
Sep-2016	100	0.3	1,100	0.4	1,200	0.7
Sep-2017	400	0.6	1,700	0.6	2,100	1.2
Sep-2018	600	1.0	2,400	0.9	3,000	1.9
Sep-2019	700	1.6	2,800	1.4	3,500	3.0
Sep-2020	700	0.3	2,200	1.0	2,900	1.3
Sep-2021	1,000	1.7	3,400	1.8	4,400	3.5
Sep-2022	600	1.6	3,800	2.2	4,400	3.8
Sep-2023	600	1.6	4,300	2.6	4,900	4.2
Sep-2024	600	1.4	4,500	2.7	5,100	4.1

Notes: Figures rounded to nearest hundred. These are [experimental statistics](#) and subject to future revision. Figures for June 2020 affected by the Coronavirus outbreak.

Source: DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 7.1

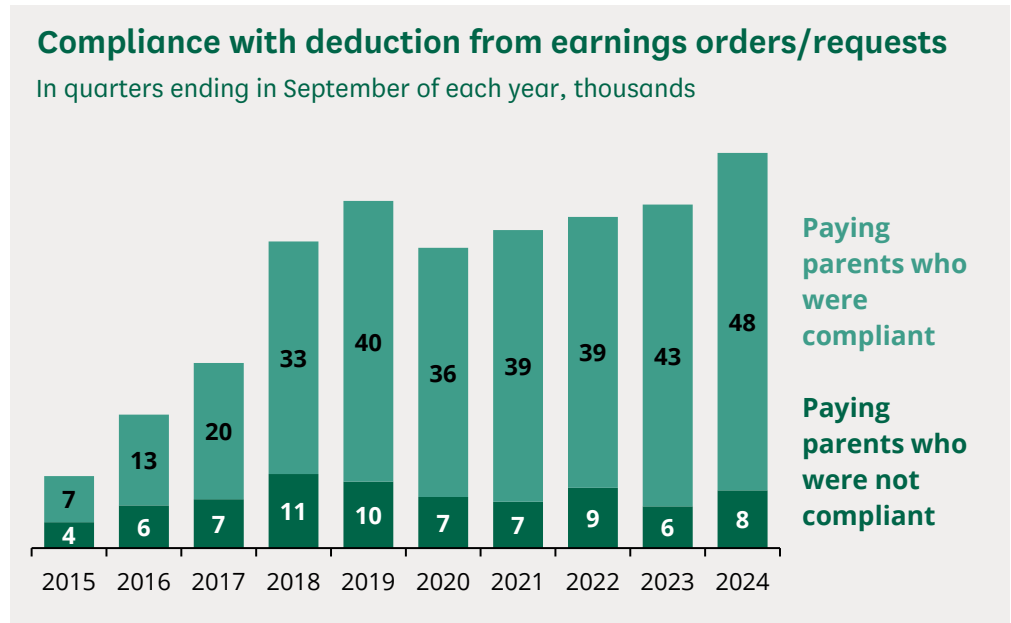
Most paying parents (and their employer(s), if applicable) with arrangements subject to deduction from earnings orders or requests (DEOs or DERs), are compliant with them: compliance rose from an average of 66% in 2015 and 2016, to 73% in 2017 and 2018, to 85% in 2021. In 2023, average compliance was 86%.⁴⁵

The total number of DEOs and DERs grew from 8,500 in the quarter ending July 2015 to a pre-pandemic high of 50,200 in the quarter ending December

⁴⁵ DWP [StatXplore](#), CMS paying parents, table 2 Compliance (collect and pay) by quarter, 17 December 2024

2019. Enforcement was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in the June 2020 quarter.⁴⁶

As shown in the chart below, in the quarter ending September 2024, the total number of paying parents using the collect and pay service with a DEO or DER was around 56,600, of which 85% (around 48,300) were compliant. The rate of compliance in the same quarter in 2023 was 88%.⁴⁷



Notes: Figures rounded to nearest thousand. These are [experimental statistics](#) and subject to future revision.

Figures include arrangements where parents have voluntarily asked for a DEO/DER. Parents may have several employers, but these figures calculate the compliance of paying parents with DEO/DERs in the round.

Source: DWP [StatXplore](#), table 2 Compliance (collect and pay) by quarter, 17 December 2024

5.2 Enforcement powers

How often are the powers used?

A paying parent can be taken to court over unpaid child maintenance. Courts can grant a liability order, which is a legal recognition a debt is owed. This enables recovery of the debt through further Civil Enforcement Actions (such as referral to an enforcement agency).

The table below provides the number of paying parents for which the relevant enforcement action was ongoing at the end of the quarter.

⁴⁶ [As above](#)

⁴⁷ [As above](#)

Enforcement actions for child maintenance

For quarters ending in September of each year

Quarter ending	Liability orders in process		Sanctions in process		Enforcement Agent Referrals in process	
	Number	Collected (£million)	Number	Collected (£million)	Number	Collected (£million)
Sep-2015	1,100		0		400	
Sep-2016	2,900		100		1,500	0.1
Sep-2017	4,500	0.7	600	0.0	2,800	0.4
Sep-2018	6,500	1.1	1,100	0.2	5,500	0.8
Sep-2019	3,800	1.0	2,300	0.5	5,600	0.8
Sep-2020	2,400	0.5	2,000	0.3	4,400	0.5
Sep-2021	5,400	1.6	2,400	0.5	3,500	0.9
Sep-2023	7,500	2.4	4,200	1.3	4,700	1.5
Sep-2024	5,000	1.8	3,800	1.3	5,500	0.0

Notes: Figures rounded to nearest hundred. These are [experimental statistics](#) and subject to future revision. The figures for the totals collected includes any child maintenance collected from paying parents whilst the liability order or sanction was in process. Enforcement action in June and September 2020 quarters were affected by the pandemic.

The liability order process was impacted by the implementation of two operational changes in the quarter ending June 2019, which caused a reduction in the numbers being processed. These are:

- i) From April 2019, requests to apply for liability orders were raised by a new, centralised team. The implementation of this change led to a temporary reduction in throughput.
- ii) From April 2019, liability orders relating to arrears transitioned from the Child Support Agency now go through a representation process to ascertain whether the receiving parent wants the debt to be collected. This means that there is an additional time delay before the liability order can be applied for.

Source: DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 6.1

Liability orders

Liability orders in process during each quarter reached a peak of 7,500 in the quarter ending September 2023, when £2.4m was collected.⁴⁸ As shown in the table above, in the quarter ending September 2024 there were 5,000 liability orders in process collecting £1.8m.⁴⁹ The DWP have stated the fall in the number of liability orders from June 2019 was a result of operational changes.⁵⁰

Sanctions

Sanctions in process include sending paying parents to prison and disqualifying them from holding or obtaining a passport or driving licence

⁴⁸ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 6.1

⁴⁹ As above

⁵⁰ DWP, [CMS statistics: Data to June 2020, GB](#), December 2020, table 9.1, note 13

(see below). The DWP say these “are a last resort and only used when every other method of recovering unpaid child maintenance has been tried” adding “the CMS only pursues these sanctions when they believe the paying parent can pay but are refusing to do so”.⁵¹

In the quarter ending September 2024, there were 3,800 sanctions in process, and the CMS collected £1.3m from paying parents undergoing sanctions.⁵²

Enforcement Agent Referrals

Enforcement Agent Referrals in process are when the CMS has referred a paying parent's unpaid child maintenance to an enforcement agent. The referral will remain until unpaid child maintenance and fees that are covered by a liability order have been paid or the enforcement agents return the case. These only occur in England and Wales. In the quarter ending September 2024, there were 5,500 Enforcement Agent Referrals in progress, which collected £0.0m.⁵³

Sanctions outcomes

As mentioned above, sanctions for unpaid child maintenance include sending paying parents to prison and disqualifying them from holding or obtaining a passport or driving licence.

From the quarter ending September 2022 to the most recent quarter ending September 2024, in England and Wales one passports had been subject to suspended confiscation orders, nine driving licences have been disqualified, one of which under an immediate order. Additionally, 683 prison sentences have been passed, 679 of which were suspended.⁵⁴

In Scotland for the same period, five driving licences have been disqualified, four of which were under a suspended order, and one prison sentence under an immediate order had been passed.⁵⁵

In the quarter ending September 2024, there were 140 prison sentences, one passport confiscation and one driving licence disqualification in England and Wales, all of which were suspended. There was also one immediate driving licence disqualification. In Scotland for the same quarter, there was two suspended driving licence disqualifications.⁵⁶ The CMS does not record the number of cases referred to a credit reference agency.⁵⁷

⁵¹ [As above](#), note 10

⁵² DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 6.1

⁵³ As above

⁵⁴ The DWP notes outcomes in England and Wales are reported based on the time that the result was recorded in centrally-held management information. This is usually within a few days of an order being made, although longer delays occasionally occur; DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 6.2

⁵⁵ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 6.2

⁵⁶ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 6.2

⁵⁷ PQ 290398 [on [Children: Maintenance](#)], 24 September 2019

Child Support (Enforcement) Act 2023

The Child Support (Enforcement) Act 2023 received Royal Assent on the 20 July 2023. The act makes a provision for the Secretary of State to make a liability order, removing the need for the CMS to apply to the court.

The relevant sections in the act are not in force, although in October 2023 the then government consulted on measures to give the CMS more powers to recover arrears. More information on this can be found in section 5.4 of the [Library briefing on child maintenance enforcement measures](#).

5.3

Financial Investigations Unit actions

The table overleaf shows the number of outcomes of Financial Investigations Unit (FIU) actions.

From the quarter to June 2017 to the quarter to September 2024, an average of 162 investigations into employers who have not implemented a DEO were completed in each quarter (excluding the June 2020 quarter). Of these, an average of 103 investigations concluded with a DEO being set up. In the remainder of cases, a DEO was determined to be no longer appropriate (except in the quarter ending June 2017, when five cases were referred for criminal investigation).

Financial investigations are carried out by the Financial Investigations Unit when a parent has complex earnings. An average of 495 investigations were completed in each quarter (excluding the June 2020 quarter), from the quarters ending June 2017 to September 2024. In an average of 224 financial investigations, the amount of maintenance due was changed because of new evidence being uncovered. A further average of nine resulted in other enforcement powers being identified.

2,290 criminal investigations were completed in the quarters ending June 2017 to September 2024 (excluding the June and September 2020 quarters, also see note of the table for issues in comparing earlier figures). Of these cases, 1,210 were dismissed.⁵⁸

Information on asking the CMS to consider more complex income can be found in the [Library casework article on challenging the undeclared income of paying parents](#).

⁵⁸ DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 7

Financial Investigation Unit outcomes

The number of investigations into paying parents by the Financial Investigations Unit, average taken across the full calendar year

Year	Deduction from Earnings Order outcomes		Financial Investigations completed				Criminal Investigation outcomes			
	of which:		of which:				of which:			
	Total	Compliance achieved	Total	Assessment changed	Sanctions investigation completed	Other enforcement identified	Total	Dismissed	Parentage result accepted	
2018	184	68	651	253	13	8	24	9	15	
2019	110	60	620	241	8	-	41	39	1	
2020	158	110	1,037	513	3	-	143	50	5	
2021	229	156	381	161	41	1	81	35	6	
2022	241	190	290	165	-	-	153	108	6	
2023	104	78	348	194	1	-	91	38	6	
Quarter ending										
March 2024	130	110	425	235	10	-	140	15	15	
June 2024	95	80	285	145	40	-	80	35	5	
September 2024	85	65	340	210	25	-	90	40	5	

Notes: Cases referred to the Financial Investigations Unit but subsequently rejected as not being suitable are not included in the figures.

The DWP states that “in the quarter ending September 2019, a large number of ongoing financial investigations were re-assigned as criminal investigations as part of an exercise to ensure cases were classified appropriately. Work was carried out to ensure potential criminal cases are now identified as such at point of intake”. In the quarter ending March 2020, a number of Criminal and DNA Investigations were re-classified as Financial Investigations. Figures for June 2020 were affected by the suspension of enforcement activity during the Coronavirus outbreak. The DWP states that “During the quarter ending September 2020, the Child Maintenance Service resumed all areas of service delivery, with the exception of some enforcement activities requiring participation by key partners such as bailiffs and courts. The statistics continue to reflect the return to normal pre-COVID-19 levels of service delivery and include clearing any backlogs that may have built up during the height of the pandemic when resources were redirected to other parts of Department of Work and Pensions”.

Source: DWP, [Child Maintenance Service statistics: data to September 2024](#), 17 December 2024, table 7; Averages for calendar years represent Library calculations

6 Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has a similar, but separate, system of child maintenance to the rest of the UK. This section provides a brief overview of the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) statistics in Northern Ireland. The Child Maintenance Service is provided by the Department for Communities (DfC) and [guides to the system](#) may be requested from the Department.

The enforcement powers of the CMS in Northern Ireland are governed by [The Child Support \(Collection and Enforcement\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 1992](#) (SR 1992/390).⁵⁹ The DfC also maintains a [list of appropriate legislation](#). Paying parents are referred to as non-resident parents in this legislation.

6.1 Maintenance arrangements

The DfC publishes [quarterly data on the CMS in Northern Ireland](#). In the most recent quarter to September 2024, the Northern Ireland CMS managed around 17,640 arrangements, which covered around 23,600 children. Of the arrangements:

- 14,960 children were covered by 10,370 arrangements on direct pay
- 8,370 children were covered by 6,370 arrangements on collect and pay
- around 720 arrangements were arrears only cases.⁶⁰

6.2 Compliance

Collect and pay

The [compliance rate for paying parents on collect and pay](#) has remained relatively stable from the quarters ending September 2022 to September

⁵⁹ Made under the [Child Support \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1991](#), Sections 29-40

⁶⁰ DfC, [Northern Ireland Child Maintenance Service Statistics: Data to September 2024](#), 4 December 2024, tables 3 and 4

2024, where between 76% and 80% of parents paid some child maintenance. In the quarter ending September 2024, the compliance rate was 79%.⁶¹

Direct pay

In May 2018, the DfC published [a review of the Northern Ireland Child Maintenance Reform Programme](#) (PDF). The report cited evidence from 2016 that in around 84% of direct pay arrangements all maintenance due was usually received. The equivalent figure for collect and pay was 60%.⁶² Around 64% of arrangements were on the direct pay service at 31 December 2016, and almost a third of clients in the 2012 Scheme had opted for this arrangement to avoid charging.⁶³

Further statistics can be found from the [DfC publication of NI CMS statistics](#).

⁶¹ DfC, [Northern Ireland Child Maintenance Service Statistics: Data to September 2024](#), 4 December 2024, table 5

⁶² DfC, [NI 30 Month Evaluation Report](#) (PDF), May 2018, p34

⁶³ DfC, [NI 30 Month Evaluation Report](#) (PDF), May 2018, pp35, 36

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