

From The Times

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Rosemary Bennett, Social Affairs Correspondent

Errant fathers will be fined automatically if their child maintenance case ends up with the commission that replaces the Child Support Agency next year.

The Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission will be given powers to charge both one-off fines and weekly fees based on a percentage of the maintenance to be paid.

Ministers believe that compulsory fees are an incentive for “nonresident parents” to reach a voluntary agreement for maintenance with their partners, so as to avoid using the commission altogether. They want the new commission to focus on only the hard cases where absent fathers refuse to pay up and attempt to evade the system.

However, the fines will also go some way towards meeting the high cost of tracking down parents who change address to avoid maintenance payments.

The Child Support Bill, which is to be published today and will set up the new commission, will make clear that the charge can be levied only against the nonresident parent and is in addition to, not instead of, the maintenance owed.

Although the Bill will not specify the level of the fines, they will be means-tested and in the order of 10 or 20 per cent of the maintenance paid: a father paying £50 a week could be fined up to £10 a week.

The Government is expecting criticism that it has got no farther in finding a way to make sure both parents register their names at the birth of their child. That was promised last year by John Hutton, the Work and Pensions Secretary, who said that joint registration was imperative for a sense of responsibility among fathers from the outset. Officials said that work was “ongoing” on trying to find a way to make both parents register, but admitted that it was proving complicated.

Under current law, fathers not married to the mother of their child must go in person to the register office if they want their name to appear on the birth certificate. Compulsory registration would mean changing the whole system.

It has also emerged that the Bill will not contain further detail on how much income support lone mothers on benefits will be allowed to keep if they receive maintenance from the absent father. They are currently allowed to keep only £10 a week, which in effect caps their income.

Officials at the Department for Work and Pensions said that it was still the intention to change substantially the “benefit disregard”, but that details were yet to be finalised.

The Institute for Public Policy Research said that changing the rules was vital if the Government was serious about its pledge to halve child poverty. The think-tank reckons that scrapping the disregard would lift 85,000 children out of poverty. “Too many lone parents are unable to persuade their ex-partners to pay more than £10 a week in child support because they know that it will end up going to the taxman,” said Kate Stanley, head of social policy at the institute.

“Simple changes in the rules could make a huge difference to parents bringing up their children alone and would encourage parents to work together to financially support their child. This change would make a real and relatively efficient contribution to getting the Government back on track to deliver on its goal of halving child poverty by 2010.”

When the Child Support Agency was set up, all mothers on benefits had their cases automatically

referred to it. That will now end.

Charities fear that the emphasis on voluntary agreements will leave lone mothers out of pocket. One Parent Families expressed concern that mothers might be forced into arrangements whereby they and their children receive less than that to which they are entitled. Parents should have “a clear choice” of being able to approach the commission and not be “pushed into making voluntary arrangements which are unsatisfactory”, a spokeswoman for the charity said. “The losers would be poor children.”

CSA troubles

1993 CSA set up; soon has problems of delay and miscalculating payments

1997 Labour announces that, of the 380,000 people who had been ordered to pay maintenance, only three quarters had paid anything at all

March 2003 Simpler formula introduced along with £456 million computer system, but backlog begins

2006 Debts reach £3.3 billion and the case backlog reaches 300,000

June National Audit Office reports that a £539 million reform had not improved it

December Announcement that CSA is to be scrapped

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article1890476.ece>