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By The Journal

A campaign was launched yesterday targeting parents on Tyneside who owe more than £50m in child maintenance payments.

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) Minister, Lord Mackenzie of Luton, visited Strawberry Place, Newcastle, the scene of a huge poster to mark the start of a six-week Child Support Agency (CSA) enforcement campaign.

Newcastle has been identified as one of nine 'problem' cities in the country, with 18,200 of the area's parents in debit. On average, each parent has underpaid by £3,000.

Newcastle was chosen to host the launch as a result of the problem being so pronounced on Tyneside.

Yesterday, Lord Mackenzie issued a stern warning to those at fault.

He said: "In Newcastle, irresponsible parents owe an average of almost £3,000 each in outstanding maintenance - money that their children deserve and have a right to.

"Our enforcement team is more determined than ever to use its powers to track down these parents and force them to support their children.

"Every day the Child Support Agency passes 37 cases to bailiffs and 36 to the courts, while 200 more begin to have money deducted straight from their pay packets.

"Today's campaign launch sends a strong and simple message to child maintenance evaders in Newcastle: Your time is running out. Act now or we will."

Advertising on radio, television and billboards will publicise the clampdown, outlining the powers of the CSA to penalise those who refuse to pay.

The adverts will make it known that parents can be taken to court with the threat of imprisonment, the suspension of their driving licence and the freezing of assets.

A total of 38 billboards will display adverts around the city while they will also be found in men's toilets, gyms and leisure centres.

CSA spokesman Andy Collins said: "Newcastle is not the worst area for this but it is one of the worst and that's why we are starting the campaign here. In the Newcastle area alone, there are over 1,800 parents who together owe more than £50m pounds in maintenance payments. This is money that should be going to the children.

"We are determined to use every means possible to make sure that Newcastle parents live up to their responsibilities." In the past year, 319 'liability orders' were placed on parents through court action in Newcastle.

Nationally, 13,000 cases went through the courts, the equivalent of 36 cases a day.