Child Support Reform: The views and experiences of CSA staff and new clients

Adele Atkinson and Stephen McKay

A report of research carried out by the Personal Finance Research Centre, University of Bristol on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions
Contents

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... ix
The Authors ........................................................................................................................................ x
Glossary of terms .............................................................................................................................. xi
Abbreviations ..................................................................................................................................... xiii
Summary ........................................................................................................................................... xiii

1 Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Background ................................................................................................................................. 9
    1.1.1 The 1991 Child Support Act ................................................................................................. 9
    1.1.2 The new scheme ..................................................................................................................... 11
    1.1.3 The main changes ................................................................................................................ 12
    1.1.4 Implementing the new scheme ............................................................................................. 13
    1.1.5 Assessment of likely effects ............................................................................................... 14
  1.2 Aims and objectives .................................................................................................................. 14
    1.2.1 Strand 1 Research with Agency Staff ................................................................................... 15
    1.2.2 Strand 2 Research with New Clients ................................................................................... 15
  1.3 Characteristics of Child Support Agency staff .......................................................................... 15
  1.4 Characteristics of staff research participants ........................................................................... 16
    1.4.1 AO participants .................................................................................................................... 16
    1.4.2 EO and HEO participants ................................................................................................... 16
  1.5 Characteristics of Child Support Agency clients ....................................................................... 17
  1.6 Characteristics of client research participants .......................................................................... 18

Part 1– Research with CSA staff

2 Characteristics of participants ....................................................................................................... 23
  2.1 AO participants .......................................................................................................................... 23
  2.2 EO and HEO participants ......................................................................................................... 23
3 Awareness of reforms and delays ............................................................ 25
   3.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 26
   3.2 Need for reform ............................................................................ 26
     3.2.1 AO responses .................................................................. 26
     3.2.2 EO and HEO responses .................................................... 28
   3.3 Reform consultation process .......................................................... 28
     3.3.1 Consultation with AO grades ........................................... 29
     3.3.2 Consultation with EO and HEO grades ............................. 30
   3.4 Knowledge of the reforms ................................................................ 31
   3.5 Delays in Implementation .............................................................. 32
     3.5.1 Old rules and new rules cases .......................................... 32

4 Implementation ...................................................................................... 35
   4.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 36
   4.2 Changes to working practices ....................................................... 37
     4.2.1 Changes affecting AOs .................................................... 37
     4.2.2 Managing the changes .................................................... 38
   4.3 Training ........................................................................................ 38
     4.3.1 AOs experience of training............................................... 39
     4.3.2 EO and HEO training........................................................ 42
     4.3.3 Managers’ views of AO training ....................................... 43
     4.3.4 Improvements to training ................................................. 44

5 How the new scheme is working in practice ........................................... 45
   5.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 46
   5.2 Changes to jobs ............................................................................ 47
     5.2.1 Changes at AO level ........................................................ 47
     5.2.2 Changes at EO and HEO level, and observations of their staff ................................................................................. 49
   5.3 Experience of working with the new IT system ............................... 51
     5.3.1 CS2 ................................................................................. 51
     5.3.2 AO grades ....................................................................... 51
     5.3.3 EO and HEO grades ......................................................... 55
   5.4 Softphone, workflow and data warehouse .................................... 56
     5.4.1 AO grades ....................................................................... 57
     5.4.2 EO and HEO grades ......................................................... 60
   5.5 Interface with Jobcentre Plus ......................................................... 61
   5.6 Operational issues ......................................................................... 64
6 Client interactions ................................................................. 67
  6.1 Introduction ....................................................................... 68
    6.1.1 AO grades .............................................................. 68
    6.1.2 EO and HEO grades ................................................. 69

7 Staff morale ............................................................................ 73
  7.1 Introduction ....................................................................... 74
    7.1.1 AO Grades ............................................................. 74
    7.1.2 EO and HEO grades ............................................... 76

8 Management, performance and productivity ................................ 79
  8.1 Introduction ....................................................................... 80
  8.2 Management ..................................................................... 80
    8.2.1 AO responses ........................................................ 80
    8.2.2 EO and HEO responses ......................................... 81
  8.3 Target setting .................................................................. 82
    8.3.1 AO targets ............................................................. 82
    8.3.2 Use of targets by EOs and HEOs ............................... 85
  8.4 Calculation and compliance .............................................. 87
  8.5 Migration of old rules cases on to new rules ..................... 88
  8.6 Solutions and Best Practice .............................................. 90

9 Benefits and limitations .......................................................... 93
  9.1 Introduction ..................................................................... 93
  9.2 AO responses .................................................................. 93
    9.2.1 Benefits ................................................................. 93
    9.2.2 Limitations .......................................................... 94
  9.3 EO and HEO Responses ................................................... 95
    9.3.1 Benefits ................................................................. 95
    9.3.2 Limitations .......................................................... 96

Part 2– Research with CSA clients

10 Characteristics of participants .................................................. 101
  10.1 Introduction .................................................................... 102
  10.2 Demographic Characteristics .......................................... 102
  10.3 Contact between NRP and children ................................. 103
    10.3.1 Regular contact ...................................................... 104
    10.3.2 Maintaining contact .............................................. 104
    10.3.3 Preventing contact ................................................ 105
    10.3.4 Shared care ........................................................ 105
    10.3.5 Severing ties ......................................................... 105
14 What clients believe needs changing ..................................................... 139
  14.1 Introduction ................................................................................ 140
  14.2 Policy .......................................................................................... 140
    14.2.1 Step-families .................................................................. 141
    14.2.2 Shared care ................................................................. 141
    14.2.3 Contact and cash ......................................................... 142
    14.2.4 £10 disregard (child maintenance premium) .................... 142
  14.3 Practice/implementation .............................................................. 143
    14.3.1 Need to keep things moving along .............................. 143
    14.3.2 A lack of teeth .............................................................. 144
    14.3.3 Time spent on small amounts .................................... 144
    14.3.4 Face-to-face contact ..................................................... 145
    14.3.5 Lack of visible case-worker and client’s past dealings .... 145
Appendix A Staff interviews and focus groups. ........................................ 147
Appendix B Clients .................................................................................. 151
References ................................................................................................. 153

List of tables
Table 1.1 Characteristics of PWCs .......................................................... 17
Table 1.2 Characteristics of NRPs ........................................................... 18
Table B.1 Numbers in sample ............................................................... 151

List of figures
Figure A.1 Business Units ...................................................................... 147
Acknowledgements

This project was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The authors would like to thank Laura Sukhnandan, Tim Knight, Victoria Petrie, Emily Cattell, Charlotte Clarke and their colleagues in Information and Analysis Directorate of the DWP for their support. Thanks are also extended to those at the DWP and the Child Support Agency (CSA) for drawing a sample of clients from the new computer system.

We are also grateful for having met with senior managers of CSA to discuss the main findings from the research, and to participants at a presentation of emerging results, for their input.

We express our thanks to the research coordinators at each of the CSA business units for their efficient organisation of participants and venues for staff interviews and focus groups. In particular we wish to thank Peter Blakemore, Gill Ledger, Michael Donnelly, Janice Martin, Debra Gregory, Geraldine Anderson, Claire Jones, Rosemary Anderson, Amanda Parkinson, Gavin Wilson and Ruth Jasper for their valued help. None of these named took part in the research itself.

Sincere thanks are due to all staff and clients of the CSA who agreed to discuss their experiences with us and willingly participated in this research.

The authors would also like to thank colleagues Sally Taylor and Chris Jacobs for their help with fieldwork and analysis.

Whilst it is intended that the report accurately reflects the views of the participants, the authors remain entirely responsible for the content and for any errors or omissions.
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## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment</strong></td>
<td>Working out how much child maintenance must be paid under the old rules. It is also called a child maintenance assessment and a maintenance assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administrative Officer</strong></td>
<td>A civil service grade, typically the first point of contact for most people contacting the Child Support Agency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Calculation</strong></td>
<td>Working out how much child maintenance must be paid under the new rules. It is also called a child maintenance calculation and a maintenance calculation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Maintenance Premium</strong></td>
<td>The Child Maintenance Premium allows a person with care who is on Income Support or income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance to keep up to £10 per week of any maintenance paid. If maintenance payments are less than £10 a week, a person with care keeps all of the maintenance paid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New System</strong></td>
<td>The new information technology system introduced as part of the reforms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old System</strong></td>
<td>The information technology system in use before the reforms, and currently still being used alongside CS2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deduction from Earnings Order</strong></td>
<td>If an employed person fails to pay their maintenance the Child Support Agency can order their employer to make deductions direct from their pay. For clients in the UK Armed Forces this is known as a ‘Deduction from Earnings Request’ (DER), with different provisions for amounts that may be taken.</td>
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**Default Maintenance Decision** A decision made under the new scheme when the information needed to work out a maintenance calculation cannot be obtained straightaway. (Under the old system sometimes Interim Maintenance Assessments (IMA) were made.)

**Executive Officer** A civil service grade, typically a line manager responsible for a team of AOs within the Child Support Agency.

**Good cause** Good cause means that there would be a risk of harm or undue distress to the parent with care or the children if the Child Support Agency tried to arrange child maintenance. Parents with care who think that this may apply to them should tell the staff at their Jobcentre Plus (benefits) office.

**Higher Executive Officer** Another civil service grade, typically a manager within the Child Support Agency responsible for several teams and EOs.

**Jobcentre Plus** An agency of the Department for Work and Pensions, responsible for the payment and administration of social security benefits for those of working age.

**Non-resident parent** A parent who lives in a separate household from the parent with care and qualifying child(ren) for whom they are liable to pay maintenance under the Child Support Act. Where parents have shared care, the parent who has the children for the shorter period is regarded as the non-resident parent. If the children spend an equal number of nights with each parent then the non-resident parent is the one who is not getting Child Benefit for the children.

**Parent with care** A parent (natural or adoptive) who lives in the same household as the child(ren) for whom maintenance is sought. Somebody other than a parent who has day-to-day care of the child(ren) is a person with care.

**Qualifying Child** A child for whom Child Support Maintenance is payable under the Child Support Act.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AO</td>
<td>Administrative Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSA</td>
<td>Child Support Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS2</td>
<td>New System</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSCS</td>
<td>Old System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEO</td>
<td>Deduction from Earnings Order</td>
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<tr>
<td>DMD</td>
<td>Default Maintenance Decision</td>
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<tr>
<td>EO</td>
<td>Executive Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEO</td>
<td>Higher Executive Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRP</td>
<td>Non-resident Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWC</td>
<td>Parent with Care</td>
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<tr>
<td>QC</td>
<td>Qualifying Child</td>
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Summary

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned Bristol University to research the experiences of staff and clients following child support reform in 2003.

The overall aim of the research is to gain initial results on how well the new child support scheme is working in practice. Focus groups and depth interviews were conducted with 42 Administrative Officers (AOs) and 12 Executive and Higher Executive Officers (EO/HEOs) between March and April of 2004. Depth interviews with 58 clients of the Child Support Agency (CSA) took place between May and September 2004.

1 Introduction

The Child Support Act 1991 legislated for all Non-resident Parents (NRPs) to take financial responsibility for their children if able to do so. It set up a new agency to assess and collect child support. Before the current reforms the CSA did not have a successful record in setting maintenance accurately nor collecting it regularly.

A new child support scheme was introduced as part of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000, and implemented from March 2003 for new cases. A very complex formula for setting maintenance was replaced by a simpler calculation based on fixed percentages of net income (e.g. 15 per cent for one child). Simpler calculations should reduce time spent gathering information and free staff to spend more time collecting child support. A further major change is that Parents with Care (PWCs) receiving Income Support (or income-based JSA) will gain from the first £10 of any maintenance received – through the Child Maintenance Premium.

This project is part of wider programme evaluating the child support reforms. The aim of this project is to gain an initial view on how well the new child support scheme is working. A first strand of research involved CSA staff, who were interviewed by the research team. A second strand was based on in-depth interviews with CSA clients, each of whom had maintenance calculations under the new rules (both PWCs and NRPs).
Part 1: Research with CSA staff

2 Awareness of the reforms and new scheme

Staff from each of the seven Business Units thought that the old scheme was overly complicated and caused problems for both staff and clients. Staff thought the new scheme was fairer and should mean quicker calculations.

Staff and managers widely believed the new rules to be in the best interests of the agency and its clients. They were much more transparent and easily understood than the old scheme. Few appreciated that at first only new cases would be dealt with under the new rules. Staff had high expectations of the new computer system and the new scheme and looked forward to working with both. Some felt disappointed by the delays, though pleased that problems were being resolved. They anticipated an improvement in their working lives and ability to deliver.

3 Implementation of the new scheme and new IT

There is an important distinction between the new child support scheme (the rules, especially the simplified calculation) and the new child support system (the IT system). The change from a complex formula to a simple calculation was an important reason for implementing reform, and staff had high expectations of how the simplification of the scheme and the new computer system would interact to improve the running of the CSA.

Several managers commented on the difficulty in changing everything at once (IT, telephony, data recording, etc.). It was also felt by some that immediate re-classification of old rules cases to new rules would have been preferable to running two different schemes simultaneously.

None of the AOs we spoke to was happy with the training they had received, and mentioned the inexperience of the trainers and inappropriate course content. Whilst some were taught things they would never use, others were left with large knowledge gaps. Some staff were not trained before having to work on the new system; others were not trained in the full range of tasks they needed.

Managers expressed frustration at inadequate training provision for their staff, although one felt that the trainers were ‘good’. Several noted that the training did not prepare staff for the job they would be doing. Most training had involved ‘perfect’ cases. Training that met the reality of the system seems more effective.

4 How the new scheme is working in practice

The breadth of change affected the jobs of all the staff we spoke to. They were not against change but seemed to be reacting badly to the number and variety of new initiatives and systems brought in all at once.
We encountered widespread friction between helpline staff and other teams. Each felt the other was not doing enough to get cases dealt with by the right person. Opportunities for more contact/information seemed to reduce such tensions.

Some managers commented that they felt busier, but not more productive, than before. Some were feeling very pressurised, with a working day more focused on handling complaints and appeasing frustrated clients. Many found that their staff were more stressed and they perceived an increase in resignations.

**Computer systems**

AOSs were overwhelmingly negative about the new computer system, CS2 – the most widely discussed issue at every group interview. Even those most receptive to technological advancement were frustrated by the problems they were facing. They described a computer system with many problems not suited to their job and made worse in some instances by inadequate training. The lack of a ‘notepad’ facility was strongly mourned, as it provided a useful client record.

Members of staff were very frustrated by the speed of the new system and felt embarrassed when callers were kept on hold whilst screens refreshed very slowly. Some staff said that they were entering some incorrect information to fill in unknown details so that they could get the system to continue with the case. Others took notes whilst clients were on the phone then completed the relevant screens afterwards.

Some HEOs and EOs that we spoke to were hopeful that CS2 could be improved and made to work well. Managers echoed staff frustration about the fallibility of the system, incorrect calculations and the number of cases getting stuck. They also complained about the lack of a delete button for accidental errors and the problems faced by people working with old rules on the new system. They knew how slow the system could be.

Workflow, which is responsible for work allocation, did not appear to be working properly in any of the Business Units. Some payments, it seems, were going out to the wrong person, or not going out at all, and not coming in properly. Staff and managers told us that they were having problems with data coming from the Jobcentre Plus Interface – information received by CSA was often wrong or incomplete, even if correctly entered.

All felt frustrated by the complexity of a system that was meant to be straightforward.

Frontline staff are unlikely to feel confident on the phones until they were fully supported by the IT system. They could not provide a good level of service if the computer system kept failing them. Managers and frontline staff each expressed these views, in different ways.

**5 Operational issues**

Some staff felt that e-mail was being over used as a means of conveying important information such as system workarounds and as a method of communicating.
Some members of staff had positive experiences of dealing with clients, and one reported getting thank-you letters from parents with care. The managers we interviewed believed that clients were less likely to contest the maintenance decision on the new rules than they had on the old.

Managers noted that some staff did not like talking to clients. In one Business Unit they had attempted to overcome this by seeking a telephony coach.

The overwhelming message from staff was that morale was so bad that the vast majority of AOs in the CSA were looking to leave. Staff believed that many members of staff were taking long-term sick leave, and doing so because of high stress levels. One commented that every single day someone in their office would be (literally) crying through stress and frustration. Some managers thrived on the pressure that caused stress in others; others were as stressed as their staff.

6 Performance management and productivity

Most focus group participants felt that their immediate line manager was aware of the pressures they were under. There was a sense, among some staff, that the higher the management the less likely they were to know the extent of the problems. They variously commented that things would be better if management listened or came to see for themselves.

Discussion around target setting allowed participants to talk about the areas that were most valuable to them or most concerned them. Whilst some thought the changes had brought more targets, others felt that it was less target driven than previously. But many AOs complained that the targets set were unrealistic, as problems with the new system slowed them down. Managing varied targets was described to us as trying to keep several plates spinning.

When there were no snags it was possible to make cases progress and reach a final calculation much more quickly than would have been possible before – some told us proudly about completing cases within a day. But other conversations with AOs indicated that compliance had gone down, and debt work was taking much longer than it did on the old computer system.

Some innovative members of staff had attempted to find alternative solutions to the problems caused by the fragile IT system, in order to provide better service to clients. Staff were not always entirely sure how near they were to breaking rules.

Most staff and managers were very worried about the prospect of mass conversion of cases from the old rules to the new rules.

7 Benefits and limitations

There was an overwhelming sense of frustration with the system, although a few things had changed for the better. Staff talked to us enthusiastically about the simplification of the rules, and the benefits these had brought to both staff and clients: there was satisfaction about examples of completing a calculation in a day.
Staff generally mentioned limitations that related to the computers rather than the new scheme. Managers, like staff, were more frustrated with computer problems than by any aspect of the reform. However there were some specific concerns about shared care and the way stepchildren were included in the calculation.

Most thought that phasing was unnecessary, and that the variations scheme was an unnecessary relic of the previous scheme.

Part 2: Research with CSA clients

8 Characteristics of participants

Interviewees were diverse and had changing circumstances. A few clients interviewed were both NRPs and PWCs whilst others had switched from being the NRP to the PWC or vice versa.

Some NRPs tried very hard to maintain contact. Other NRPs had been prevented from having unmonitored access to their children because of alleged acts of violence. A small number of PWCs said that their ex-partners had decided to cut all contact with their children.

For some NRPs their preferred method of providing for their children was by making them happy through direct gifts, rather than paying for basic provisions such as food and shelter (through the income of the resident parent).

9 Understanding and awareness of the CSA

Most people we spoke to formed their expectations based on fragmented information about the CSA gleaned from the media or friends. Very few had any in-depth knowledge on which to base their expectations. Some clients, both NRPs and PWCs, told us they had been warned by friends to do whatever they could to prevent the CSA getting involved.

Most of the respondents who felt they knew something about the calculation were under the impression that the CSA took 15 or 20 per cent of income. Some indicated that the percentage increased with number of children. A considerable proportion of clients (wrongly) assumed that housing costs were taken into account. One was aware that travel costs could be included, but others travelling long distances to visit children did not know this.

Some clients had potentially significant misconceptions about the rules. Very few were aware that the rules had changed recently (though all were new rules clients). The vast majority of benefits claimants we interviewed were unaware of the Child Maintenance Premium. Among those few who knew about it several commented that the amount (£10) was too low.
10 The application process

The child support reforms have meant shorter forms. Some people had difficulty understanding and completing forms, but others told us it was straightforward. Many clients told us that they returned more than one form, because the original had been lost. Some had also been subsequently phoned by staff who asked for details that had already been provided.

Clients were understandably very frustrated when forms went missing, not least because it caused delays. It was also apparent that the telephone system was causing frustrations and that very few people had found that they could speak to a member of staff who knew anything about them, or who were able to answer their questions easily. Staff often did not call back even when they had arranged a time to do so, according to clients.

Very few clients felt they had been consistently treated well on the telephone; male clients tended to feel less well treated than female clients, but this could be reflecting their typical role (payer versus recipient) rather than gender. However a few noted that some members of staff were polite and helpful. Some women on benefits felt discriminated against and one felt that staff did not take her seriously because she was claiming benefits.

Some NRPs felt that the calculated level was fair and reflected what they felt able to pay. A few NRPs did not seem overly bothered by the amount calculated, but were more concerned that the method of calculating their ability to pay was fair. Some added that they were more interested in the use of the money.

We also heard many examples of dissatisfaction among clients. This ranged from rude or inappropriate comments which they alleged were made by staff, to refusals to put a dissatisfied client through to a manager.

11 Impact

Some PWCs were frustrated that the CSA did not do more to guarantee a regular income from their ex-partner. Typically PWCs who were receiving payments told us the money was very important to them, enabling them to buy things for their children such as school clothes, shoes and outdoor coats.

In a few cases, the PWC felt that the overall impact of the involvement of the CSA had been negative despite their ex-partners being compliant.

A number of NRPs told us that their ex-partners were ‘playing the system’ – fraudulently claiming Income Support or other benefits. PWCs also thought that some NRPs were not declaring all their income.

12 What needs changing, according to clients

Each client interviewed was given the opportunity to suggest ideas for improving the child support system, and the CSA in particular.
Some NRPs objected to the fact that the CSA was unable to extract money from the absent parent (usually father) of any resident step-children. Some PWCs noted concerns that additional contact (overnight stays) meant a lower maintenance calculation, though parents were often keen to link issues of contact and child support.

Both PWCs and NRPs perceived that there was a hard core of people who were not compliant – this was based on a combination of press and media attention, and what they might have heard from friends and contacts. In many cases there was a good deal of scepticism about the effectiveness of the CSA in dealing with such difficult groups, despite a perception that these, were the true target of child support legislation.

For many clients, their main hope was that the CSA would function in a generally efficient way – that calls would be answered, staff would get back to them as agreed, and they would not have to repeat information. All too often, according to clients, these modest aspirations were not met.

It is in all parties’ interests to avoid arrears building up. There was frequent mention of the potential benefits of an early accessible face-to-face service.

Without a strong or straightforward means of tracking cases, people may end up giving the same information repeatedly. In our view this problem becomes magnified if a different member of staff deals with different stages of the case.
1 Introduction

In this opening section we set out some of the background to the research project. We begin by describing the development of child support policy and the Child Support Agency (CSA) in the UK.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The 1991 Child Support Act

The CSA was created in 1993, with the role of implementing the Child Support Act 1991 and subsequent legislation and reforms. Previously child support had been dealt with through a mixture of the courts and, more commonly for benefit recipient cases, by DSS liable relative officers. Discretion was at the heart of the system. Dissatisfaction with arrangements for setting maintenance and its collection may be traced back at least as far as the 1974 Finer Committee (which proposed a guaranteed maintenance allowance). Amounts of maintenance were uncertain, their revision over time patchy, and rates of compliance with making payments rather low.

The Child Support Act 1991 made plain the principle that all Non-resident Parents (NRPs) should take financial responsibility for their children if able to do so. This legislation was introduced at a time when the Government was taking a greater interest in the growing numbers of lone parents, and the increasing number of children not living with both (biological) parents. Overall, about one child in five now lives in a lone parent family, with step-families perhaps accounting for a further one in eight children (Haskey, 1994).

The Act established the general principle of biological responsibility for children among NRPs. That leaves open the question of how to set an appropriate specific level of financial contribution. How far should this reflect the circumstances of the NRP – including any new partner or children – and how far should the circumstances of the Parent with Care (PWC) make a difference. Both sets of circumstances may be quite variable over time.
The 1991 Act adopted a detailed formula for calculating maintenance. The formula had myriad complexities – involving concepts of ‘exempt income’, ‘protected income’, ‘assessable income’, ‘maintenance requirement’, and so on. Its calculation required the CSA to have a large amount of information to make an assessment, on all the relevant family circumstances of at least two sets of people. Its apparent aim was to set a ‘fair’ level of maintenance by reference to a wide range of circumstances. Indeed, later reforms (following Improving Child Support 1995) introduced still further fine adjustments (such as allowance for previous capital settlements and distance between absent parent and child) aimed to optimise fairness. Some aspects of these adjustments are in fact reflected in arrangements for ‘variations’ to the simpler calculation being used for new cases.

In 1993 a £15 disregard for any maintenance received was introduced into Family Credit (and Housing Benefit). However, any child support paid to parents claiming Income Support simply led to a reduction in benefit received\(^1\). This prompted discussion that the laudable moral aim of the proposals – enforcing obligations and increasing the money available to lone parents (in particular) – had been compromised by a Treasury imperative to reduce public spending. The lack of any reward to recipients of Income Support meant that PWCs receiving Income Support had no financial incentive to co-operate with the policy – except through the possibility of a benefit sanction if they did not co-operate without ‘good cause’. It also meant that some NRPs/PWCs had an incentive to make informal arrangements. Working Family Tax Credit (WFTC) recipients, as early as October 1999, gained from a complete disregard of maintenance and no requirement to co-operate in pursuing maintenance.

Public attitudes towards child support tend to follow the general principle that fathers have financial obligations towards their children. However, in people’s minds this general principle is sometimes qualified by reference to changes in personal circumstances. When asked (in the British Social Attitudes Survey in the early 1990s) what should happen if a PWC remarries: 51 per cent thought payments should continue, 13 per cent say they should stop, 33 per cent say it depended on the new husband’s income (Kiernan, 1992). More recent analysis by White (2002) and Peacey and Rainford (2004) also found support for the general principle of child support, although with certain provisos about the income of the parents counting in working out child support.

In practice, the original child support scheme failed to improve the position for children. Although the Agency has almost 1.5 million children on its books, only around 250,000 children were gaining financially from child support payments. This was because families living on Income Support saw their benefit reduced by every

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\(^1\) More recently the Child Maintenance Bonus meant that a lump sum of money could be received by PWCs being paid child support whilst receiving Income Support, when they moved into paid work. The new scheme does not have such a feature but there is the Child Maintenance Premium instead. For ‘old’ cases Child Maintenance Bonus entitlements continue.
penny of maintenance paid, and many others gained nothing because no maintenance was paid. Fewer than half of the children who gained from child support payments saw the benefit of all the maintenance that NRPs were assessed to pay. Many parents were not meeting their responsibilities: only around 45 per cent of earning NRPs using the CSA collection service were paying in full.

The scheme was comprehensively reviewed because the Government judged that the service could only be transformed by radical changes. The Government expected clear improvements in the new scheme that will be visible to the Agency’s clients and the public more generally. This visibility will be achieved via the Government’s Public Service Agreements which are seen as the ‘contract with the people – a promise of improvements in both quality and the efficiency of the services the public pay for and use’. The DWP version includes the following key target for Child Support:

‘Double the proportion of parents with care on Income Support and income-based Jobseekers’ Allowance who receive maintenance for their children to 60% by March 2006’.

A consultation paper ‘Children first: a new approach to child support’ (Cm3992) was published in July 1998 and described the Government’s proposals for reforming the child support system. A year later, in July 1999 the white paper, ‘A new contract for welfare: children’s rights and parents’ responsibilities’ (Cm 4349) was published by the Government, setting out the measures it would take to tackle what it saw as the main drawbacks of the old system:

• The formula used to calculate child support liability was extremely complicated because it tried to recognise all the parents’ costs and available sources of income. This resulted in an assessment that was very difficult to understand and required substantial amounts of information (over 100 items per assessment) to complete. It was therefore prone to errors and was constantly in need of updating to reflect changes.

• The old arrangements, which are still in operation for most of the Agency’s clients provide parents with little incentive to co-operate: for cases where the parent with care is in receipt of income-related benefits, levels of benefit are reduced by every penny of maintenance paid. And the Agency had, until January 2002, limited powers to impose penalties on those who refused to co-operate with the scheme.

• All this resulted in a poor standard of service from the CSA as it tried to clear its backlog of cases awaiting assessment, diverting it from spending more time on ensuring that maintenance is flowing quickly and in full.

1.1.2 The new scheme

The latest set of reforms was introduced as part of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000. The main goal of the new scheme, which started for new
cases on 3 March 2003, is to address the issues detailed above. The new scheme has been designed to implement and operate a child support scheme which:

- is accessible, comprehensible and responsive to the parents involved;
- ensures that more parents pay maintenance for their children after separation;
- increases the proportion of Parents with Care (PWCs) on Income Support who receive maintenance for their children; and
- improves value for money in terms of the ratio of administrative costs to maintenance flowing and savings in benefits expenditure.

1.1.3 The main changes

In order to achieve the reform to the child support scheme several changes have been made. These include:

- Maintenance liability is based on a simple slice of the NRP’s net income. For most people this means their earnings after tax, National Insurance and pension contributions are taken off.
- For NRPs whose income is £200 a week or more the rates are 15 per cent of net income for one child, 20 per cent for two children and 25 per cent for three or more children.
- Those with income of less than £200 a week pay less maintenance and NRPs with a net income of £100 a week or less – and those on specified benefits (including income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance or Income Support) pay a flat rate of £5 a week.
- The calculation takes account of all children in a NRP’s current family, including stepchildren. Before maintenance is calculated, the net income is reduced by 15 per cent for one child in the family, 20 per cent for two children and 25 per cent for three or more children.
- If a child for whom maintenance is payable stays with the NRP for one night a week on average through the year the maintenance calculation takes this into account. A NRP on benefit who shares the care of the child for at least 52 nights of the year will usually be exempt from paying the £5 flat rate.
- A new Child Maintenance Premium will mean that lone parents on Income Support will be able to keep up to £10 per week of maintenance that is paid for their children.
- To help the CSA ensure that NRPs cannot avoid their responsibilities, the new legislation builds on the legal sanctions in the old scheme. In particular it:
  - introduced criminal sanctions (with a fine of up to £1,000) for anyone who lies or refuses to provide information to the CSA;
  - provides for a late payment penalty of up to 25 per cent of maintenance due;
  - allows the CSA to use tax information to work out maintenance liability if the Agency is unable to get details of earnings direct from the parent; and
– simplifies the rules for deciding whether a man is the father of a child, bringing them more in line with other paternity provisions.

• The aim of the reformed scheme was to enable the CSA to transform the service it provides to clients. In particular it was intended to help the Agency to ensure that:

– maintenance will be flowing in 4-6 weeks, rather than 6 months or more as under the old scheme;

– contact with parents will mainly be by telephone, with opportunities for face-to-face interviews when these are appropriate;

– a substantially greater proportion of the Agency’s resources will be directed towards making sure that maintenance is paid regularly and on time;

– parents will be sent regular statements of account;

– any dispute about liability or payment arrangements will be sorted out as soon as possible;

• parents who are uncertain about the way that their liability has been worked out will be able to discuss the decision by telephone or face-to-face with someone who understands the details of their case; and

• tribunals which are able to settle disputes quickly and efficiently will be available to all.

The calculation is slightly more complex than just a simple percentage of income, but very clearly overall the calculation of maintenance is much simplified. This should make it much easier to calculate – including for the two parents affected – and require the collection of much less information about changing personal circumstances. It was therefore hoped that the time saved on the information gathering would free staff resources to spend greater time on collection and compliance.

1.1.4 Implementing the new scheme

The new scheme was introduced for new cases from 3 March 2003. New IT equipment has been developed and installed, and new working practices have been designed and communicated to Agency staff. Some changes in the CSA’s working practices, for example greater use of the telephone to contact clients, offering clients face-to-face interviews, changes to the Decision Making and Appeals procedures and the establishment of small teams of caseworkers who take responsibility for all action on a case from the receipt of an application until maintenance is flowing, were introduced prior to the new scheme starting.

Initially (from 3 March, 2003) the new scheme is being applied to new applications only. Those cases initiated before the implementation of the new scheme will be changed over to the new rules at a later date, but only once the new arrangements are shown to be working well. Changes in liability for existing cases will be phased in
by fixed steps. The CSA has sent two mail-shots to all existing clients informing them of the changes. Information packs have been distributed to key people and organisations such as MPs, Client Representative Groups, and the Citizens Advice Bureau which explain and provide detailed information on the changes to the scheme. To continue this information provision, the Business Units are also holding awareness sessions to familiarise people with the changes and the operation of the new scheme.

1.1.5 Assessment of likely effects

Academic assessments of the likely effect of the new reforms have been few. Paull et al (2000) noted there was: ‘very little evidence to make an informed estimate of the likely changes in compliance’. Research on absent parents by Bradshaw et al (1999) appears to find rather limited evidence of untapped capacity to pay more child support. However, research in the USA has identified a rising trend in compliance over the 1990s, particularly for never-married mothers receiving child support. Policy changes are one strong element in these trends (Freeman and Waldfogel 1998). Changes in the United States have tried to increase the flow of funds from biological fathers to the mothers, many of whom are not working. Using different data, Case et al (2000) find that gains in collecting child support are associated with changes in legislation governing awards.

There is increasingly strong evidence about the range of positive effects of regular child support. Studies in Britain find a strong association between receiving child support, and lone mothers being in paid work (Ford et al 1995). Child support may also contribute to greater child well-being – the conclusion from a review of 63 studies by Amato and Gilbreth (1999).

1.2 Aims and objectives

The aim of this project is to gain initial results on how well the new child support scheme is working. A qualitative methodology has been employed in order to explore the issues and consider the effects of the reform on those involved. One strand is concerned with CSA staff, another with clients new to the CSA and hence being assessed under the new scheme. The second strand covers both PWCs and NRPs.

It should be noted that this kind of research does not seek to provide representative data on the proportions of people having a particular view, and where any quantification is used in the report it must be taken in the correct context.

This project sits within a wider programme of research evaluating the child support reforms.
1.2.1 Strand 1: Research with Agency staff
Qualitative research with Agency staff was designed to gather information on operating the new scheme. The areas covered include:

- Staff awareness of reforms and their rationale, and their involvement in implementing those reforms.
- Understanding of the new scheme.
- Perceptions of the reforms.
- Staff views on implementation
- Experience to date.
- Feedback from staff, such as when dealing with clients.

1.2.2 Strand 2: Research with new clients
This element of the research involved interviews with new clients using the CSA, exploring their experiences of the scheme and identifying any improvements they believe should be considered. A range of more specific questions included:

- Knowledge of the new scheme, and how well it is understood.
- Perceptions of contact with Jobcentre Plus.
- The application process.
- For clients with previous CSA contact, perceptions of any changes.
- Impacts on contact arrangements, amounts of maintenance received.
- Any room for improvement in the operation of the scheme.

In addition to exploring attitudes and experience, research under both strands sought to identify examples of good practice.

1.3 Characteristics of CSA staff
Within the CSA the typical employee is aged 25 to 34 years old; one-third are aged 30 or younger. Average annual earnings are around £12,500 per annum.

The CSA workforce is relatively inexperienced: 33 per cent of staff have been with the Agency for two years or less and around half have worked in the Agency for four years or less. (Source: Memorandum submitted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (CS 2) to Select Committee on Work and Pensions, 18 June 2003).

Those approached to take part in the research were managers (EOs and HEOs), who had individual interviews, and frontline staff (Administrative Officers (AOs)) who took part in focus groups. Frontline staff tend to work in teams dedicated to particular functions, in particular new client teams, or on the national helpline, but sometimes in teams specialising in tasks such as maintaining compliance or debt recovery, or on specialist tasks such as tracing.
1.4 Characteristics of staff research participants

Participants for the first strand of this research volunteered to take part following advertisements placed by research coordinators within each of the Business Units. However, where the number of volunteers exceeded our requirements we randomly selected participants from all those that offered to be involved.

1.4.1 AO participants

A total of 18 male AOs and 24 female AOs participated in one of seven focus groups and one individual depth interview. They had an average length of employment with the CSA of around 4 years, ranging from just six months to 11 years (i.e. since the CSA began). These members of staff had followed various career paths before joining the CSA. At least one had been a civil servant for over 20 years, and several had spent time working for the Benefits Agency or other government agencies – indeed a couple had previous experience of the CSA and had returned after a career break. Not all had been civil servants: some had taken the job after spending time working in a range of alternative roles including factory work and managerial positions. A few had joined straight from university.

As experience of the new computer system was a condition of participating in the focus group everyone had some experience of CS2, but four did not have working experience of the new rules (they were in ‘transitional’ teams). Others were working on maintenance assessments and calculations using both old rules and new rules on the new computer system, whilst some Helpline staff used both sets of rules and both systems. It is important to note that staff who were processing old rules cases still contributed to the discussions about the reforms since they had been part of the Agency during the process. Of the four transitional team members the length of service with the CSA ranged from four years to 11 years.

The majority of focus group participants belonged to so-called ‘target’ or ‘new client’ teams. Others were from functionalised teams specialising in particular areas, including ‘debtor’, ‘MAF preview’, ‘trace’ and ‘sensitive cases’.

1.4.2 EO and HEO participants

Depth interviews were conducted with nine male and three female EOs and HEOs, a quarter of whom were ‘acting up’. As all but one of these interviewees were responsible for managing one or more teams, they will be referred to collectively as managers. Participants had been with the CSA for between 1½ and 11 years. Not surprisingly the average length of service was longer than for AOs, at 7½ years. Around half had started as civil servants with other agencies and then transferred to the CSA. Government agencies they had worked for included the land registry and Customs and Excise.

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2 This respondent is included in the report as a focus group participant and AO member of staff.
Whilst the majority of HEOs and EOs managed new client teams, two worked with the National Helpline and one was involved with Parliamentary Business. All had some experience of the new computer system, and only one did not have a working knowledge of the new regulations.

### 1.5 Characteristics of CSA clients

It was important for this research project to take account of the different groups among both PWCs and NRPs. The most recent statistics, at the time of the research design, came from the CSA Quarterly Summary Statistics May 2003. These are mostly based on clients predating the new scheme, but may provide some guide to the profile of new clients. Whilst more up-to-date figures are available, and on an ongoing basis, we report the information that we had at the time of designing the study.

The gender split among NRPs and PWCs was very marked. Only 5.7% of NRPs were female, and unsurprisingly a very similar proportion of PWCs were male. Some 24 per cent of NRPs were living with a ‘new’ partner, whilst 14 per cent of PWCs were also with a partner. About five per cent of PWCs had two or more NRPs associated with their case – they have children from more than one biological father. Conversely a proportion of the NRPs have children living in the home of more than one PWC.

PWCs claiming child support through the old scheme are roughly evenly split between recipients of Income Support (or income-based JSA), WFTC recipients and others (Table 1). It is the first group that are effectively required to co-operate with the CSA. The other groups may elect to use the CSA for working out and collecting maintenance.

#### Table 1.1 Characteristics of PWCs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number (,000)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income Support</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSA(IB)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFTC</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>924</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Full assessments on CSCS: May 2003
CSA Quarterly Summary Statistics: May 2003

This profile may change with the new scheme. Initial evidence (covering 3 March – 31 May 2003) showed 37,000 benefit applications (i.e. those received via Jobcentre Plus) among the first 50,000 received.

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3 WFTC has, of course, since been abolished and families may instead be receiving Child Tax Credit and possibly Working Tax Credit.
One of the key divisions among NRPs is by work and benefit status. This affects the likely level of child support payable, and potentially the ways in which maintenance may be collected. Just over half of NRPs (53 per cent) were in paid work, with employees much more numerous than the self-employed (Table 2). Many of the remainder were receiving social security benefits of different kinds. As such, a significant proportion would be eligible for reduced rate assessments, and often flat rate payments (typically £5 per week).

### Table 1.2 Characteristics of NRPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number (,000)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Support</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSA</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>924</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Full assessments on CSCS: May 2003
CSA Quarterly Summary Statistics: May 2003

### 1.6 Characteristics of client research participants

Interviewees were selected as either PWCs or NRPs. In practice a few were both – having some children they were looking after for whom there was an NRP, and having children elsewhere for whom they were the NRP. Interviews focused on the characteristic for which they had been selected, though of course the interview covered the whole range of circumstances. Family structures were far from static – some of the clients we spoke to had also switched from being the NRP to the PWC, or vice versa, at some point – sometimes as a result of letting children make the decisions about whose house they wanted to be at.

The ages of interviewees ranged from 20 to 58 (average ages were 41 for NRP and 33 for PWCs). The clients interviewed had between one and five qualifying children, aged between eight months and 16 years old.

Despite being involved in the recent child support reforms, clients taking part in this research had been separated from the other parent for an average of more than three years, ranging from 14 years to none – indeed some were still living together. Some PWCs had never lived with the NRP. We did not explicitly ask about the reasons for separation, but heard that a significant number of ex-partners had been violent or abusive during or after the relationship. It is worth noting a relatively high level of distrust and bitterness between ex-partners, and only a minority of more amicable separations.
As this suggests, some of the interviews were often quite sensitive and difficult. The interviewers working on the project were selected, in part, through having worked on sensitive topics before. All respondents were reassured that the information provided was confidential, and would only be used for research purposes. Interviewers also had access to details of further information, advice and support, should they be needed.
Part 1 – Research with CSA staff

This part of the report considers the views of volunteers from each of the seven CSA Business Units. In total, 42 Administrative Officers (AOs), six Executive Officers (EOs) and six Higher Executive Officers (HEOs) of the Child Support Agency (CSA) were interviewed between 11 March and 6 April, 2004. The reforms were introduced on 3 March, 2003, approximately one year before these interviews were conducted. For detailed information about the recruiting of participants and the location of the Business Units refer to Appendix A.
2 Characteristics of participants

2.1 AO participants

Focus groups were convened with AOs from main offices and satellite processing centres within each of the seven CSA Business Units. The final composition of the groups included staff from a variety of teams including those working on the National Helpline, ‘New Client’ teams and ‘Debt’ teams.

The only criteria for participation were availability on a set day and experience of working on CS2, the new computer system brought in with the reforms. Focus groups therefore included newly recruited staff with no experience of the old rules or the old computer system (CSCS), as well as long-serving staff with over ten years’ experience in the CSA.

Four participants were working exclusively on old rules cases on the new system – they did not have working experience of the new rules. They were all long-serving members of staff and had been present during and before the reforms. Staff were unlikely, initially, to know what their role would be after the reform and so we can expect that they would have been equally receptive to information and discussion. Furthermore all staff expected to move to new rules cases once cases were converted.

2.2 EO and HEO participants

EOs and HEOs participated in one-to-one depth interviews, lasting approximately one hour. They were kept separate from the focus groups in order to allow the participants of the focus groups to speak freely without being concerned about the reactions of higher grades. This was generally felt to be the right approach among the focus groups and the EO and HEO participants, although some AOs did not have concerns about speaking freely in front of the EO, as they believed they were aware of the salient issues.
A quarter of the participants were ‘acting up’, that is they were temporarily working in a role at least a grade above their usual status. All but one of the EO and HEO interviewees were responsible for managing one or more teams.

The majority of HEOs and EOs managed new client teams, but two worked with the National Helpline and one worked in Parliamentary Business. All had some experience of the new computer system, and only one did not have a working knowledge of the new regulations.
3 Awareness of reforms and delays

Key messages

We spoke to staff and managers a year after the implementation of the reforms. Staff described the need for reform in terms of the negative aspects of the old scheme, and how they affected staff and clients alike. Managers spoke about reform in terms of improving performance: productivity, levels of compliance and numbers of complaints. Both groups noted that to bring about their preferred changes there was a need to reduce the complexity of the assessment (now, calculation).

Whilst staff did not believe that Administrative Officers (AOs) had been consulted about the scheme in general, they were aware of colleagues who had been consulted, via the Model Office, about the new IT system. The perception of staff we spoke to was that the recruitment process for the Model Office resulted in too few ‘loyal’, ‘mature’ members of staff being involved. This suggests that the quality of such working groups could be improved with the use of more short-term placements and incentives that appealed to experienced members of staff fully committed to improving the Agency.

It can be difficult to hit the right balance between the content and amount of information provided during times of change. It was clear during the interviews that it was not uncommon for people to feel that they should simply be given less information about the reforms because they were becoming overloaded. Some people would have also preferred less persuasive, more factual information. It might be more appropriate to signpost information that staff can access rather than actually provide all the information.

At the time of the research, staff believed that the reform had made the kinds of changes that were needed in terms of simplification and improved transparency. The vast majority of staff and managers we spoke to were able to tell us about the components of the new maintenance calculation and felt it was a big improvement on the old one.
Although everyone knew the basic information about the new calculations, staff on the frontline were not in consensus about the rules relating to Parents with Care (PWCs) in receipt of benefits. There is a clear message here that training needs to address the more complicated regulations and those that impact on cases less frequently.

3.1 Introduction

The changes made to the child support scheme (the rules) and system (the computers) were considerable. In this first substantive section we examine whether staff believed reform was necessary (section 3.2) and the level of consultation perceived in relation to the direction of change (3.3). We then examine staff knowledge of the reforms, which was mostly excellent, in section 3.4 before considering reactions to the delayed implementation of the new scheme for new rules cases (3.5).

3.2 Need for reform

Staff and managers were asked to consider why the reforms had taken place, and to describe the changes they had hoped to see. It should be noted that they spoke to us a year after the reforms were implemented and were therefore talking to us with hindsight, and after many opportunities to discuss this with their colleagues. Despite this caveat, it was very clear that the people we spoke to were able to separate in discussion their early hopes and expectations from their later experiences.

3.2.1 AO responses

Staff from every Business Unit thought that the old scheme was overly complicated. This was considered to be a problem for both staff and clients. They commented that it was difficult and time consuming to train staff in the old rules. It was very hard for staff to explain the old rules to clients, and they claimed that it was almost impossible for them to go through the calculations with clients on the telephone. The vast majority of the focus group participants believed that the need for simplification was one of the main reasons for changing the rules. One member of staff explained to us that as a direct consequence of the complexity of the rules, it was common for clients to request a face-to-face interview.

Most focus group attendees commented that the reforms were intended to address the length of time it took to process a case. This is, of course, related to the complexity of the rules. The amount of information needed and the difficulty in calculating maintenance obligations inevitably led to a slower service. One respondent went on to talk about the desire to speed up the service as being an important part of the overall policy of getting money to needy families:
‘...[you needed] to do a calculation and process a claim before you got money through and you could have cases taking six months or 12 months and being backdated. So the idea was to reduce child poverty to have money flowing faster.’

(Focus group participant)

It was mentioned by staff that the old rules left some Non-resident Parents (NRPs), in their opinion, without enough money to live on. Indeed there was at least an implicit acceptance that the former scheme could require some NRPs to pay too much money, although we did not discuss whether this was due to the assessment, the use of interim maintenance assessments, or the combination of child support with arrears. It was felt by them that the reforms were intended to convey increased levels of fairness to the NRP by requesting generally lower levels of maintenance. However, other participants felt that the apparent complexity of the old regulations ensured that the system was actually fair, and that any simplification would necessarily take away the personalisation of the assessment. It was noted that only male participants voiced this preference for complicated rules and we might infer that there was a feeling of solidarity between some male staff and (overwhelmingly male) NRPs. These members of staff were not convinced that fairness motivated the drive to reform:

‘I think now the system as it was before, complex though it was, it was very, very complex, it took into account an awful lot of each person’s circumstances so it would take account of housing costs, it would take account of additional costs that they might have.’

(Focus group participant)

Staff were aware of some specific consequences of the old rules which needed addressing. For example, there was a perceived problem with taking into account the household income of the NRP, which effectively made a new partner support the non-resident children – albeit in a very non-transparent manner only relevant in some permutations of income. They also commented on a propensity for NRPs to take on larger mortgages (by converting to a shorter term for the loan, remortgage or moving to a bigger house) to lower their maintenance payments through higher housing costs in some parts of the formula.

‘Modernisation’ itself was mentioned in several Business Units as a reason for reform. It was generally accepted that the old IT system, CSCS, was outdated, and that there was a need for staff to have access to personal computers with e-mail and office software, rather than monochrome dumb terminals. This was not viewed merely as change for the sake of change but rather an opportunity to replace the old, fallible computer system with something better. It was less common, but not unheard of, for respondents to feel that this was the driving force for changing the regulations, rather than a welcome side effect:
‘The system that we had was falling down. CSCS was on its last legs. Why put in a new system to deal with old rules when you can put in a new system to deal with a brand new simplified system [resp. means ‘scheme’] at the same time.’

(Focus group participant)

It was noticeable that several AOs also perceived a political need for reform. This is unsurprising in the light of media attention towards the Agency and campaigning activities by some groups.

### 3.2.2 EO and HEO responses

All but one of the managers we spoke to mentioned that one of the reasons for the introduction of reforms in the Child Support Agency (CSA) was that the old rules were unreasonably complicated. This was consistent with the views of the members of staff we interviewed:

‘If you’re asking somebody to pay, what can be a large chunk of their salary, even if it is for their kid, you need to be able to explain how you’ve worked it out and they need to understand that’

(EO/HEO)

It was noticeable that managers tended to focus on different aspects of the consequences of complicated rules from their staff. For them, simplification was discussed as a way of improving productivity, and possibly decreasing staffing requirements. One manager commented that the reforms cost a considerable amount and it was expected that they would result in cost cutting exercises elsewhere. This manager claimed that he/she was not surprised when the Government consequently announced large job losses within the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), although not just within the CSA.

Whilst it was mentioned that the level of detail required under the old rules brought a sense of fairness, the majority felt that the complexity of the system caused problems for both staff and clients. Many pointed out that in order to complete an assessment they needed to collect over 100 pieces of information from clients. It was unsurprising then that it was generally felt that the reform aimed to speed things up through simplification, thus improving compliance and cutting complaints.

It was noted by some managers, as among staff, that new legislation was needed to remove ‘loopholes’ used by some NRPs to avoid payment. Specifically, they mentioned the habit of taking on larger mortgages in order to lower disposable income and hence their child support payment – a practice which other staff (as well as clients as we shall see later) had also heard about.

### 3.3 Reform consultation process

We discussed with staff and managers the level of consultation about the reforms. Not everyone had been involved with the CSA during the early stages of the design and implementation, and so the analysis of responses reflects the views those
participants who were available for consultation before 3 March, 2003. We should not, of course, expect that each member of staff would play a full or detailed role in lengthy consultations about policy making. The emphasis is more on how staff are informed about the process of change, and how their experience is best brought to bear on particular reform issues, perhaps particularly around implementation.

3.3.1 Consultation with AO grades

It appears that staff were aware of the consultation papers discussing the need for reform, and knew that changes were on the horizon. AOs were generally of the opinion that they had not personally been consulted about the reforms. A few noted that a lot of information was provided, and some felt it was intended to encourage optimism, rather than inform:

‘Leaflets would come round.’

‘Brainwashing, yes.’

‘Glowing reports were coming out.’

(Three participant at a focus group)

None of the AOs we spoke to were aware of other AOs who had been involved in discussions about changes to the regulations, but some of their colleagues had taken part in some level of consultation about the system changes through participation in the ‘Model Office’ at Longbenton. However, they did not regard this as effective consultation for several reasons. Firstly, interviewees did not believe that their concerns were always being reported to the developers in the model office by these colleagues. Secondly, they had been told by returning colleagues that when they made suggestions they were not being taken on board by the developers:

‘...people coming back down perhaps for a long weekend or whatever from Newcastle who had actually been involved in this Model Office, coming back and just shaking their heads and saying they won’t listen.’

(Focus group participant)

‘They were not supposed to be saying, but they were saying that it was not good because they were putting forward suggestions and the suggestions were disappearing into a black hole. It was just as if EDS [the suppliers of the computer system] had a system that they wanted us to have and they weren’t prepared to change what they did.’

(Focus group participant)

Some focus group participants had found it difficult to get straightforward information about the changes afoot from colleagues on their return from Longbenton. Others had been given feedback, which they felt was overwhelmingly negative:
‘I do not think we had a clue what was going on. I personally did not get any feedback or hear any news about what was going on in Model Office’
(Focus group participant)

‘But the feedback from people who helped there was that it was a complete sham’.
(Focus group participant)

There was some discussion about the type of people who offered to participate in the Model Office. It was pointed out by several participants that colleagues were seconded to the Model Office for months at a time, making it impossible for those with dependants or other commitments, to volunteer. It was widely believed that consequently volunteers were overwhelmingly single young people with little feeling of responsibility or long-term commitment to the agency.

The Model Office was the only consultation process mentioned by the majority of focus group participants. Most felt that they were not expected to express their opinions about proposed changes. It was noted by participants at one focus group that even an opportunity to discuss the changes had been marred by the insistence that their questions weren’t overly negative:

‘People would ask questions or even comment, now we might say ‘well we have heard that this actually isn’t the case’ you know, that so and so is not working or ‘that is not working’, and immediately we were clamped down on, ‘you must not be so negative’. ‘
(Focus group participant)

The only other official opportunity to talk about the reforms mentioned during any of the focus groups was in the form of ‘team time’. It appears that team time was intended to be a monthly opportunity to discuss the reforms, but that it did not become an established practice among any of the staff we spoke to.

3.3.2 Consultation with EO and HEO grades

Some managers had been aware of talk of reform since approximately 1997. As with the AOs, not all managers were in post when reforms were first discussed, and some did not hold management posts. Clearly this would affect the level and type of discussions they were invited to participate in relating to reform.

Of those who were in post when the reforms were introduced, a minority claimed that consultation happened only at Ministerial level, whilst a few others talked of ‘town hall’ events, where all grades were encouraged to ask questions and discuss the changes. Consequently some felt they were directly involved in the decisions, whilst others felt they were not encouraged to get involved:

‘But no, we weren’t consulted; I think it was Ministerial level. It was decided that something needed to change and they told us what those changes were.’
(EO/HEO)
Those who mentioned the availability of information about the reforms described it in a variety of ways, ranging from very positive to quite negative. Information about the reforms was said by one respondent to be better communicated than anything else has been. Another described it as information overload. One noted that all the information provided focused on procedural rather than policy matters, albeit the former would have been of most direct relevance.

We were told by an HEO that a lot of the ‘low level’ design was done by EOs who had previously been operational managers, and therefore were perceived as ‘clever’ (technically competent). It seems that this manager felt that the EOs recruited did not have the theory and skills necessary for the task they were given and were actually volunteering for the reforms project because they wanted to get away from their current post, and gain increasing levels of power from their involvement in the reforms.

3.4 Knowledge of the reforms

Staff and managers were generally very comfortable with the changes to the rules when we spoke to them, approximately a year after the reforms. It was widely believed that the new calculation (new rules) was in the best interests of the Agency and the clients, providing a much more transparent, easily understood alternative to the old assessment. The simplification also meant that everyone had quickly picked up the main aspects of the calculations and were happy to relay to us the calculation percentages relating to number of children and the new rules relating to overnight stays. Only one manager was unfamiliar with the basic criteria.

Further probing uncovered some areas of the new regulations that frontline staff were less sure about. In particular there seemed to be some confusion about the legal aspects of benefits cases. Some focus group participants believed that PWCs on benefits must claim through the CSA unless they could show ‘good cause’, whilst others were informing PWCs on benefits that they could make private arrangements. Some believed that the ‘Benefits Agency’ [the former name for the DSS part of Jobcentre Plus] could deal with such cases if the PWC didn’t want the CSA involved:

‘But I know a client that has been told, the case is being dealt with in Belfast, and on seven different occasions they have put different answers on that one. He has always paid her direct, she declares the amount to the Benefits Agency, and come to us and we put the assessment in place and he has been told that he has got to pay it through us, that is law. Then he phones up again and is told ‘no you don’t, you can pay it direct, no problem’. Then they get another letter saying no, you cannot.’

(Focus group participant)

‘I do not even know what they can and cannot do.’

(Focus group participant)
It would appear from this finding that there are specific staff training needs in relation to benefits cases in order for staff to become confident and provide a consistent approach. As benefits cases are a large part of the work of the Agency this finding also indicates that there may be other, less common, aspects of the reforms that require further training and consolidation.

3.5 Delays in implementation

All staff and all managers knew that the changeover day was 3 March, 2003, universally known as ‘A’ day. Most were also aware that the date for implementation had been put back by almost a year, having been originally set for 2002, and some felt they had been provided with information about the revised timetable:

‘We did have these charts showing all the different stages and that kept being put back or put forward.’

(Focus group participant discussing the information provided about delays in implementation)

Managers were aware that their staff were looking forward to working on the new system, and that some felt disappointed (‘devastated’ according to one manager) about the delays, but most respondents were under the impression that things were moving slowly because the contractors were ironing out problems with the computers. They saw this as a good sign, indicating that everything would be in full working order when it was finally rolled out. Indeed expectation built up to fever pitch in some Business Units, according to managers.

Delays apparently caused issues with training for some people, as each time the reform was delayed the training schedule was affected. One team leader noted that staff were pulled from training after half a day due to delays in implementation, and felt that this had jaundiced them.

Despite the knowledge that reforms were forthcoming, some staff were only told the actual date a week before the computer system went live. Staff from one Business Unit told us that information began to dry up as the delay lengthened. There was definitely a feeling in some focus groups that the final implementation date (‘A’ day, if not subsequent migration and conversion) was politically driven:

‘They put him (Alistair Darling [former Secretary of State at DWP]) on the rack and he said ‘no, it is not going to be another year’. Then everybody said ‘his speech was on such a date, I think it is going to be 3rd March’.

(Focus group participant)

3.5.1 Old rules and new rules cases

It was common for staff to comment that they had not fully understood the plan for the changeover from old rules to new rules. Some said it was not made clear to them from the beginning that some clients would remain on old rules after ‘A’ day. They assumed that you couldn’t have the new system without the new rules; they expected everything to come at once:
‘Facilitator: Did you believe they were both going to come in at the same time?’
‘Initially, yes.’
‘You could not have one without the other.’
(Focus group discussion about the introduction of new rules and new IT)

‘Facilitator: Did you know at that time that there were going to be some people on old rules and some on new rules?
‘No, they didn’t really give us specifics at that time no.’
(Focus group discussion about concurrent old rules and new rules cases)

Others had been under the impression that there would be a few months of adjustment, during which time some old rules cases would be on the new system, but that within three to six months every case would be on the new rules, and on the new computer system.
4 Implementation

Key messages – Changes to working practices

Staff and managers who had experienced both rapid change and more gradual reforms felt that the gradual approach was more appropriate. However, despite widespread support for gradual changes to working practices, there was overwhelming backing for total, rapid change to the way clients were dealt with. In particular it was considered a bad idea to continue holding some clients on the old rules and implement phased payments.

It was noticeable that some staff felt disengaged from their colleagues because of the changes. The difficulties with the IT, combined with the restructuring of teams meant that their jobs were more stressful, but their usual support network was depleted. Few of the managers felt that the implementation had been entirely successful, and those who did agreed that staff needed gradual change. This suggests a need for greater communication between managers and staff to find the most appropriate method for introducing changes. There may also be a benefit to building up relationships across teams, and sections of the Agency, so that future restructures are less daunting to individuals separated from their colleagues.

It is not possible to draw conclusions about the interactions between managers’ views of the implementation and that of the staff we spoke to, as this would assume that they were working on the same teams. It is noteworthy however that there was very little confidence among the managers we spoke to in relation to their part in the implementation of the reforms.

Key messages – training

Staff generally felt that their training had not properly prepared them for their new roles, and particularly working on the new computer system. The training discs lacked realism and staff would have preferred some training on a live system, with the opportunity to address difficult cases in a supportive environment. They also commented on the need to try the system themselves – rather than learning through watching others on a screen or over their shoulder. They all thought there was significant room for improvement of the training courses, both in terms of delivery and content.
There was also a lack of support for the generic nature of the training among those members of staff we spoke to. Staff would have preferred the training to address their specific needs in relation to the job they were doing. They did not feel it was appropriate to learn about things they did not use, or to be given only basic training in areas they had specialised in, and where they already had prior knowledge.

The early training may have been better if trainers had been given sufficient time to familiarise themselves with the system they were expected to be giving training on, and the reality of day-to-day work for the staff they are training. This is an important lesson for future changes; it also indicates a need for more dialogue between the IT planners and trainers when new systems are to be introduced soon after completion.

Managers do not all feel the need to be trained to the same level as their staff, and it is understandable that front line staff should be the main priority. Despite this, it appears that managers could be given a bigger role during the training process, both in supporting their staff through the training and implementation issues, and by liaising between trainers and staff to ensure the training is appropriate to the needs of the team and the Agency.

We were told that a new modular style of training was being implemented and this was generally welcomed and seen as more appropriate to the needs of staff. We noted that the introduction in one business unit of a training room specifically for training on live queues, with the co-operation of more experienced staff to identify areas needing targeted training, provided good examples of best practice that could be followed elsewhere.

4.1 Introduction

It is important to re-emphasise the distinction between the new child support scheme (the rules, especially the simplified calculation) and the new child support system (the IT system, CS2). The scheme was heavily simplified as part of the recent reform process. The system, by contrast, became much more ambitious, and was designed to enable staff to process cases and interact with clients much more effectively. Most public discussion of the reform process focused on the changes to the scheme, and only more recently has the important distinction between scheme and system come to be more widely appreciated.

Staff had high expectations of how both elements would together interact to improve the running of Child Support Agency (CSA), client perceptions of it and their own satisfaction with their working role. However, problems with the IT system had meant that reform had to be re-scheduled until March 2003, and staff reports suggest that their preparation for the ‘big bang’ change of ‘A’ day was often lacking.
In this section we look first at changes to working practices taking place concurrent with the reform. We then look in detail at the training provided in advance of reform, and shortly afterwards. We point out that the staff interviewed were probably among the first to receive training, and that we are aware that training has been modified since to take into account some early feedback. It is worth reiterating that interviews took place a year after implementation, and it is to be expected that there will have been further changes within the Agency since we visited.

4.2 Changes to working practices

4.2.1 Changes affecting AOs

Most Administrative Officers (AOs) felt that they were given information about the implementation of the new scheme and new technology but were not expected to input ideas – which would be normal practice for reforms of this nature.

Implementation varied across Business Units, and possibly across offices. Focus groups in two Business Units told us that changes were made in stages so that they could get used to new work practices. These changes included the introduction of new telephony and new computing equipment. In other Business Units everything was apparently changed at once, and several focus group participants from these Business Units commented that they felt it would have been better if the changes were brought in gradually. They would have preferred not to have had to become familiar with new rules and new computers at the same time, and the concurrent introduction of a new telephony system in these Business Units was also considered to be a bad idea.

Some staff felt that it was unnecessary to change the computer system at all now that the rules are so simple; arguing that much of the work could be done clerically. Some also felt that it would have been better to implement the new rules across the board, rather than have two schemes running at the same time. In one Business Unit it was suggested that they could have arranged voluntary payments during the transfer of cases from old rules to new rules. Furthermore, it was argued that the system of phasing, introduced to make changes to payments gradually, was a bad idea, leading to unnecessary work for staff and confusion for clients. Clearly when changes are made, the issue of transitional arrangements is always going to be difficult, with arguments for and against a gradual approach and forms of transitional protection.

In at least one Business Unit, implementation was accompanied by changes to the team structures. This included changing the internal telephone directory which caused confusion among staff trying to pass on callers. Staff weren’t consulted about the team changes, and they would have preferred it if they hadn’t been moved around.
As a consequence of the team restructuring and the introduction of end-to-end working, staff in some Business Units told us they did not know where to go for help. Similarly, when a client needed a specific service a few members of staff had no idea who to direct them to. During these discussions it also became apparent that team names such as ‘target’ were uninformative for staff trying to find a client someone who could help.

4.2.2 Managing the changes

Several managers commented on the difficulty in changing everything at once (IT, telephony etc.). However, whilst it was noted that gradual introduction of new rules and systems would have helped staff, it was also felt by some that immediate reclassification of old rules cases to new rules would have been preferable to running two schemes simultaneously. It was suggested that the cases could have been prepared for moving and the clients given 28 days notice before migration, in order to register any objections.

It was uncommon for managers to appear particularly positive about the implementation process. Just a few felt prepared and had specific ideas to make the implementation run smoothly for their staff. One had, for example, ensured that new entrants to the CSA were not put on the new computer system straight away. Another had set up ‘change teams’ to be responsible for the change over. There was a strong sense that these managers were happy with their contribution to the implementation and felt they had helped their staff through a difficult time, although they acknowledged that things were not necessarily running smoothly:

Interviewer: ‘Could the implementation have been any better?’

‘I’d say they dealt with it pretty well. I’m pretty pleased with that.’

(EIF/HEO)

4.3 Training

Some training was necessary in order to familiarise staff with the new technology (system) and new legislation (scheme). For some, training was provided before March 2003 whilst others had their training much later. It was not provided in the same way or for the same length of time in every Business Unit, and varied across grades. Training delivery also evolved over time, starting with block release and developing into a modular system, with time for practice and consolidation. Most Business Units combined training on the new IT system with training about the new rules, but one Business Unit apparently started by training staff how to use the new IT to process old rules cases.

The changes in the regulations were intended to take staff away from so-called ‘functionalisation’ (specialisation in one or a few task areas), and introduce them to ‘end-to-end’ working. This was a considerable change for some, and brought added complexity to the training requirements. With this kind of working, the training had to cover all tasks in a way that could be understood by those entirely new to that kind
of work, and in enough detail to satisfy those who felt that they were already specialists in a particular task.

4.3.1 AOs experience of training

The staff were very comfortable with the changes to the scheme and had good knowledge of the basic calculation when we met them a year after the introduction of the reforms. However, it was common for them to feel very uncomfortable with the IT system, CS2, and most of their discussion of the training related to this aspect. Their confidence with the much simpler new scheme and the extreme emphasis on aspects of the IT during all conversations indicates the overwhelming importance of the computer system in their day-to-day work. It is apparent that good training in this area is vital for staff confidence.

None of the AOs we spoke to was entirely happy with the training they had received. The reasons for this dissatisfaction were numerous, from the trainer’s apparent lack of experience with the new system, to the perceived inappropriate content of the courses. Staff commented on being taught things they felt they would never use (being over-trained), and feeling concerned that they were coming out of training with large gaps in their knowledge (being under-trained). Staff felt that the trainers were only just becoming accustomed to the new computer system themselves; and we were told by some that the trainers had received only the training they were delivering:

‘The training and this is not to pick on the trainers, the training I got was abysmal, absolutely dreadful.’

(Focus group participant)

Timing of training

Despite the delay in implementation, a number of staff were not trained before having to work on the new system, and others were not trained in the full range of tasks they were expected to undertake. We were told that one team of sixteen, working entirely on CS2, initially had only one trained member. Some members of this team were not trained for a year after implementation. It was also noted that difficulties with the new IT also resulted in the training covering facilities that ‘didn’t work’, in the hope that these facilities would eventually be brought into operation.

In contrast to the late training of some staff, various members of staff told us that they were trained on the new system then expected to go back to working on the old system for a considerable amount of time. A few claimed they had not been given their CS2 password for six months after completing the training. It was clear that participants felt that this was unacceptable.
Amount of training

Training was provided for between three days (six months after implementation) and two months (for a new recruit). Most received around three weeks, although the amounts reported varied even within Business Units. Where staff had already gained hands-on experience the training was generally shorter, and sometimes used to consolidate, or to identify new priorities for training others. Experienced staff found that they were sometimes expected to get to grips with the new system with very little help. One AO claimed that they had to cover in two days a topic that new employees were trained in over six weeks.

Training delivery

The majority of staff were offered training from specially prepared discs containing only straightforward and problem free cases. Just a few had any training on the live system, and apparently some did not get hands-on experience of the training disc for much of the course. For them, training was instead given via overhead projector. In just one Business Unit we were told that staff could train online, but nobody we spoke to had direct experience of this.

One Business Unit appeared to have had a radically different approach to training from the others. The training session was themed around island-hopping and staff were given ‘passports’. Trainers did not have the final version of CS2. This was described as like being back at school (other comments indicate playschool), in that the environment was geared to playing games, and not taking things too seriously and the training was delivered by overhead projector. We asked for examples of games played and were told that every ten minutes they were asked to stop and tell someone in the room something personal about themselves. When asked if they felt this had encouraged team building, the answer was a unanimous no; indeed one participant said they felt ‘distraught’ at the end of it. Descriptions of this training scheme included ‘juvenile’, ‘ridiculous’, ‘stupid’ and ‘patronising’. One person commented that the contents were largely ‘fluff’; explaining that the ‘fluff’ was a result to the need to fill a large amount of time with very little information of any relevance. This view was not contradicted by anybody in the focus group.

Although the focus group participants were unanimously disparaging of the training, some noted that a few members of staff did go along with the island-hopping theme of the training, and seemed to take on the role of childlike participant. Anyone who has experience of IT training will be aware of some of the difficulties in maintaining interest, and will sympathise with attempts to raise levels of enjoyment and interest. On this occasion the balance does seem to have been inappropriate, at least for the participants of this focus group.

Content

Training generally focused on new rules and the new computer system. Most felt that the rules were straightforward, allowing them to focus their attention on the system. A minority of focus group attendees were still working with old rules. Some
of these were not shown how to work old rules on CS2 and felt they needed to be fairly computer literate to make sense of the training and apply it to their circumstances.

We were told that the training that was provided was not specific to anyone’s needs. It was clear that staff felt that rather than a general training course that would enable them to do any job in the Agency, they wanted directed training, covering the specific tasks that they undertook in their current posts. This is particularly relevant as most of the people we spoke to had returned to functionalised tasks (rather than end-to-end working) on completion of the training.

The preference for training that matched current work roles was common across all the Business Units and may indicate a reluctance to embrace the introduction of end-to-end working and the process of change within the Agency.

A few staff also commented that despite being given generic (one-size-fits-all) training based on the principle of end-to-end working they were not taught how a case progresses on the new system. It seems that the training could have benefited from an overview that showed staff how all the individual components of the process of assessing and collecting maintenance fitted together.

Because staff were unhappy with the generality of the training the teaching of more complicated tasks was commonly discussed in focus groups. Accounts were a typical example. Those staff who worked on accounts felt that they had become more complicated on the new system and deserved special attention for trainees who would be working in this area. Conversely staff such as those on the Helpline were frustrated that they were being taught about accounts, since it was a difficult topic and not relevant to their job. The over-emphasis on timelines was also a common frustration among staff, although in this case there was universal frustration at having to learn something so difficult (apparently time-lines are never used in day-to-day work). Furthermore, one focus group told us that there was a test at the end of their three day, timeline training; they claimed that nobody got the ‘answer right’. It should be noted that there was no evidence that this had knocked confidence; rather it was discussed as an example of how the training did not meet their needs, and was emphasising difficult but possibly less relevant issues.

One person noted that in five weeks of training the word ‘task’ wasn’t heard once. This is remarkable given the nature of the new system, which splits cases into a series of processes commonly referred to by the number allocated by CS2 (for example ‘Task 8’). Tasks are not numbered consecutively and one might expect them to be introduced early on in a training programme in order for staff to familiarise themselves with them.

In some Business Units training was followed by a period of consolidation, with consolidators walking around the offices providing guidance and support. Some of these were well respected but others did not offer the level of knowledge required to give staff confidence. During one focus group, some participants explained to one of the others what a consolidator was and assured this person that they did have
one, indicating that there may be a need to make such services more widely accessible and to raise awareness. Those consolidators who were respected tended to be described in ways that suggested they were proactive and informative, offering information and organising ‘quality hours’ where a number of staff could get together to discuss any ongoing problems:

‘Our consolidator send us an e-mail when they find something new that might help us and they actually come round and say to us have you got the e-mail, do you understand it’

(Focus group participant, describing how the consolidator kept them informed)

‘He actually said to me, I don’t know what I’m doing.’

(Focus group participant, describing a consolidator who was unhelpful)

Staff frequently commented on the importance of good consolidation, and as more staff gain experience the opportunity to provide new trainees with good quality consolidators should increase.

4.3.2 EO and HEO training

Managers talked to us about their own training in preparation for A day, and that of their staff.

Managers were not routinely trained in the use of the new computer system, at least initially, in some Business Units. In fact of those interviews length of training ranged from none to three weeks:

‘In the past they didn’t but within this agency everyone that I know that is a team leader did do the training with their team.’

(EO/HEO)

Training for managers on the new system and scheme was not considered to be a priority in all Business Units; it was considered more important to get frontline staff up to speed. So in addition to those who were still untrained, in three of the Business Units we found interviewees who had not been trained until at least seven months after implementation, or had been accessing training as and when they could. This was accepted by some, who felt competent to get to deal with the changes. Others felt it would have made them better able to support their staff if they had undergone the same training:

‘Yes it would have been nice maybe on the management side but I think you pick things up. I wouldn’t sit back and just think oh well I’m not going to do it. I’m the sort of person that would go and find out what I needed to do.’

(EO/HEO)
Again, it is understandable that there are different views on the level of practical knowledge that managers require in such circumstances. It is possible that the different views may, in part, reflect the availability and quality of alternative guidance available to the AOs on their team.

4.3.3 Managers’ views of AO training

Managers generally realised that as the reforms introduced a new scheme and a new computer system, providing good quality training would be difficult. It was still relatively early days when most of their staff went into training, and the managers understood that the trainers had only recently been trained on the new system themselves. This did not stop them from expressing some frustration at the inadequacy of the provision for their staff, and only one felt that the trainers were ‘good’. Several noted that the training did not prepare staff for the job they would be doing and that trainers were unable to answer specific questions:

‘I think the whole training provision for the new system…has been absolutely terrible.’

(EO/HEO)

The staff managed by these respondents received training for different lengths of time; between eight days and 3-4 weeks. The staff receiving the most training were described by their manager as ‘over trained’. Furthermore the Business Unit providing just eight days of training had originally been running four week training courses, perhaps suggesting a more widespread opinion that staff could be adequately trained in a much shorter timeframe.

Managers had been given the same feedback by their staff as we received at the focus groups in relation to the content of the training courses. They had been told there was an excessive focus on specific topics (such as timelines), and that the training overlooked the importance and difficult nature of accounts and finance. One manager also felt that the attempt to cover rules and IT at the same time was unsuccessful.

Managers confirmed that, as discussed in focus groups, almost everyone they knew had been trained on ‘clean’ cases, often from CD and sometimes via a PowerPoint presentation or ‘over someone’s shoulder’. They also noted that these cases did not have problems associated with them, and consequently did not prepare staff for any real difficulties they may encounter (and soon did). One manager felt that this was probably a good thing, since staff may have been less keen to get started on real cases if they had been alerted to the problems during training:

‘The fallout from the training would have been that bad that we could not have really made the decision to go ahead with [implementation].’

(EO/HEO)

Managers indicated that some of their staff, who were trained prior to implementation, had been shown earlier versions of CS2. They felt that when their staff were made
aware that they were not using the final version of the computer system they stopped paying attention. Indeed one manager felt that one of the main problems with the training was that the lesson plans had been created using the ‘design briefs’ of the system rather than the final version of CS2. This created frustrations, such as being shown features that do not exist on the system they now work on, and trainers providing some information about features that would exist but being unable to show how staff might use them.

In one Business Unit a training room had been set up to allow follow up training on live queues. This was considered to be a good idea, since it allowed staff and trainers to work together to identify areas in need of targeted, or extra, training. This initiative was not mentioned elsewhere.

4.3.4 Improvements to training

Some staff and managers told us that they believed the training had improved since their own training, or that of their teams. In particular, trainers started delivering the course in modular format, with time for consolidation between topics. There has also been a greater emphasis on training on live cases, and formal discussion between earlier trainees and trainers about the more difficult topics so that these can be given special attention. Indeed some managers felt that there was a great deal of feedback coming from the earlier trainees that was being taken into account to improve the training:

‘Yes, well they are constantly working to try and bring the training up to scratch, by feeding back the experience and the problems, the things that trainees are highlighting to us, about what they found not helpful about the training and that is, that has massively changed the training provision.’

(EO/HEO)

Just one manager did not think that the modular training was a move in the right direction. This was due to the fact that they were very much in favour of end-to-end working and did not feel that modular training was in the spirit of this innovation. Otherwise, there was general agreement that modular training was better than block release for staff because they were able to practice what they had learnt and gain confidence in each aspect before moving on:

‘The feedback is much better because people are actually getting hands-on experience of working with the live system and seeing how that works.’

(EO/HEO discussing the new modular training on live cases with consolidation)
5 How the new scheme is working in practice

Key messages – changes to jobs and IT

Despite the fact that the reforms brought significant simplification of the rules used to calculate maintenance, staff felt that their workload had increased. Levels of stress and dissatisfaction had increased, and support structures had been eroded with the formation of new teams. This resulted in some staff feeling undervalued and friction between various parts of the Agency.

Managers appeared more able to cope with the changes. They are also distanced from the day-to-day pressures of the IT system, but were aware of the increased levels of stress among their staff and some recognised that the initial anticipation (and high expectations) had given way to despondency. Staff need to be led through change in a way that both prepares them for likely problems and provides hope that things will improve. Change must also be carefully managed, to safeguard working relationships that benefit the organisation, and prepare staff for their new roles. Managers should not overlook the perceptions of their staff both in terms of the type of job they are expected to do (telephone-based or paperwork) and views about the appropriate pay levels for that job.

The changes to the IT system were widely anticipated, but when we spoke to users they were overwhelmingly negative. This negativity was such that it was often difficult to engage staff in discussions about any other aspect of the reforms. They were frustrated with many aspects of the CS2 system, including the speed and accuracy, and the number of ‘incidents’ where cases could not be progressed. The most frequently mentioned irritation with the new system was the lack of ‘notepad’. It cannot be stressed enough how important this feature is in the eyes of the staff who work for the Agency.
It was noted that when operators made an error, there was no easy way to rectify the problem. Managers did not have ‘administrator rights’ over the data, and so problems had to be dealt with at higher levels. They found it frustrating that sometimes they could see what the problem was and yet were unable to sort it out themselves. It was also apparent that there was lack of dialogue between staff, managers and the team in Longbenton, set up to create workarounds for the IT problems. The implication here is that there may be a need to train some managers in CS2 and give them certain rights of access to the data, in order to overcome the currently crippling effects of operator errors.

The combination of inappropriate training and problems with the system has created long delays in calculating maintenance. Staff are concerned about their clients, and want to achieve some level of success with the cases they are working on. They are therefore trying imaginative, but possibly ultimately problematic, ways of keeping cases moving through the system. The staff are aware that their innovations may well be causing further problems along the line, but see no alternative.

In addition to problems with CS2, the staff and managers we spoke to told us that they faced difficulties because workflow did not operate as they expected, data warehouse was not providing the level of detailed statistics required for managers, and the telephony was causing stress within and across teams. The interface between the Jobcentre Plus and the Child Support Agency (CSA) also appeared to be failing to provide accurate information, and was adding to the level of frustration with the IT.

It is clear that the problems with the widespread IT changes are slowing down the staff and making the Agency less efficient than was anticipated. Methods are needed to prioritise the right tasks and create suitable workarounds. It appears that more testing is needed on the interface. It might also be beneficial to provide specific training on benefits cases that takes into account the needs of both Jobcentre Plus and CSA staff, encouraging them to work together in taking responsibility for these important clients. Staff also need clear guidelines about priorities (processing work at all costs even if it may ultimately result in further delays for the clients they are trying to help).

5.1 Introduction

Implementing the new regulations resulted in necessary, widespread change. Teams were restructured; computing, telephony and target data collection were all affected by the upgrading of the technology; and CSA rules and regulations were radically overhauled. The breadth of change naturally affected the jobs of all the staff we spoke to in some way. Some of the changes were received very positively, such as the simplification of the rules, whilst others resulted in mixed feelings among the staff.
5.2 Changes to jobs

5.2.1 Changes at AO level

Administrative Officers (AOs) are on the frontline, dealing with clients and processing cases, and the underlying aim of their job remains the same whether they are working with the old rules or the new rules – they are collecting money to support children. The reforms are intended to make this process faster and more effective by bringing about necessary change and improvement to the agency.

Staff were comfortable with the changes to the rules. They appreciated that this aspect of their job had improved; it became easier to discuss calculations with clients, and most new clients were able to understand the rules without difficulty. As this was the most frequently mentioned reason for the reform it is reassuring that it has been a clear success, and made a positive change to the work of the AOs.

It was apparent that whilst the staff were happy with the changes to the regulations, they were keen to tell us about some of the more negative aspects of the recent changes. The staff we spoke to were not, on the whole, against change but did seem to be reacting badly to the number and variety of new initiatives and systems brought into the CSA at the same time:

‘That’s what’s made it hard for everybody really isn’t it? The fact that they’ve not only changed the Child Support Reform but they’ve changed the computer system, they’ve changed, they’ve changed everything. They’ve changed the terminology, everything has been changed.’

(Focus group participant who felt that change should have been gradual)

For some, a perceived lack of support during this time had left them feeling isolated and vulnerable. Most, but not all, also felt that their workload had increased as a result of the changes. Workload increases were seen as a result of staff absences, computer problems, and inefficient allocation of work through both the workflow system and the telephony system.

One of the big innovations introduced as part of the reforms that was discussed across all the Business Units was end-to-end working. In principle end-to-end working enables staff to process any type of task between initial contact and first payment. This has had mixed reception. We were told by one person that ‘I like the end-to-end process now’. They were not alone in feeling that it was an acceptable way to work, indeed perhaps the best and most appropriate way, but a far more commonly held view was that staff had not been given sufficient support or consolidation to deal with the change from ‘functionalisation’ (focusing on specific tasks) to end-to-end. A relatively new member of staff voiced the lack of support during this change, and resulting lack of productivity, graphically:

‘I must have sat there two or three months, I’ve never felt so alone in my entire life.’

(Focus group participant)
For this AO, the promised ‘buddy’ designated to support them through the implementation of the reform had been off sick with stress and no replacement had been offered. They described how, on returning to the office after training, they sat in front of the computer and did not know what to do. This person was of the opinion that the ‘buddy’ hadn’t even been told they were meant to be supporting someone. The AO was more confident about the use of the system when we met, but did not seem to have requested, nor been offered, alternative support.

End-to-end working, or ‘multi-tasking’ as some described it, was sometimes seen as a fundamental change to the work that staff were expected to do, and without due reward. Some members of staff felt that they were specialists in a particular field, and that their knowledge had been discounted in the rush to reform. Some were simply concerned that they had definite strengths and weaknesses and could not effectively deal with all aspects of cases. It is reasonable to assume that for these people the widespread use of targets added to their worries, as they would feel under pressure to perform equally well in their weak areas after the reforms.

Despite the drive to work end-to-end some staff found that they were still functionalised. It was not uncommon for staff to be still concentrating on specific tasks. Indeed it appeared that some Business Units had reverted entirely to functionalised working. However it was noticeable that there was both a strong reticence in divulging this information (to external researchers) and a desire to find out from us whether or not other Business Units were working end-to-end.

Whilst end-to-end working had increased the complexity of the job for some staff, helpline staff commented that their job had become more mundane. We were told that the new IT system does not allow them access to all the information available to case workers. Debt teams commented that they were also unable to do everything they once could, and had to wait for other members of staff to do some tasks for them – which caused friction between staff and frustration on both sides. Lack of access to the full range of functions did not seem to be the case for those working on Parliamentary Business who claimed that sometimes they fixed problems themselves.

Staff also told us about changes to the level and type of phone contact they were having with clients. Comments centred less on the increase in frequency and more on the kind of interactions that they had with clients, but there was no consensus about the changes. One of the AOs that we spoke to had looked forward to the move away from case ownership that was promised as part of the reforms because they found protracted dealings with difficult clients unpleasant and stressful. This member of staff was therefore disappointed that in practice there was actually very little change. Conversely, in another Business Unit, one participant told us that one of the disadvantages of the new scheme is that they rarely get to build up a relationship with clients now because once they complete a task they may have nothing more to do with that client.
Reform also brought about a change in teams, support networks and respect among staff. One group was concerned that after training together and supporting each other through implementation they were soon to be split. They were especially frustrated as they felt there was a good feeling across the whole command. In another Business Unit we were told that everyone hates everyone else in the building. It seems they either blame each other for errors, or assume everyone else has an easier job than they do. This Business Unit also noted that team work had given way to a desperate need to reduce individual queues of work which, with blocked ‘incidents’ showing, could appear very long.

We encountered widespread friction between helpline staff and other teams, as they each felt the others weren’t doing enough to get cases dealt with by the right person. Some helpline staff felt that longer serving case workers weren’t prepared for telephone contact with clients. This was echoed by a case worker who commented that end-to-end working had resulted in the need to discuss difficult situations with clients over the phone, such as compulsory deductions of earnings for non-payers, something they were uncomfortable doing.

We did not encounter anything to suggest that staff were becoming accustomed to the raft of changes, or that relationships across teams were improving, but we believe that this can be largely accounted for by the depth of frustration they continued to feel for the problems with the IT system.

5.2.2 Changes at EO and HEO level, and observations of their staff

Managers have faced changes in various parts of their working lives as a result of the implementation of the new regulations, including to their roles, their working day and the teams they manage. When we spoke to them, approximately a year after implementation, most of the interviewees were rising to the new challenges. However, some commented that they felt busier, but perhaps not more productive, than they had before the changes. Some were feeling very pressurised.

We heard from several Executive Officers (EOs) and Higher Executive Officers (HEOs) who felt that the changes had brought an improvement to their working life. One HEO had the flexibility to try out alternative working practises, and only felt held back by the lack of confidence of his/her staff. Another commented that he loved his job, which he felt had changed since implementation.

For some, the working day was much more focused on handling complaints and trying to appease frustrated clients, than it had been before implementation of the new regulations. Some disliked this aspect of their job, but did it out of a sense of responsibility, despite having a dedicated complaints team.

Some managers found that they were no longer highly competent using the computer system and so had been forced into a more supervisory position. Conversely, others felt that they had had to offer more technical support because their once experienced staff were all beginners again.
One of the consequences of the new regulations is a change in opening hours. Clients are now able to contact the CSA between 8am and 8pm. This has resulted in a number of new issues for managers to address, from the possibility of changing their own hours, to offering effective management across a twelve hour period. It is more difficult for managers to catch up with all their staff now that there are a variety of shifts. At least one was working extra, unpaid hours just to make contact with some of their team members. Managers also pointed out that staff often found themselves taking messages for each other, an activity they considered unproductive.

In one Business Unit we were told that promotion was linked to working hours flexibility. It appears that this had resulted in a growing disquiet among working parents who were unwilling or unable to work evenings or weekends. Managers found this difficult to deal with, on top of the general increase in stress among staff brought on by the changes.

Managers found that new staff were generally able to cope with end-to-end working and the telephony based system more readily than experienced staff. Many found that their staff were, on the whole, more stressed; there was also a perception that there had been an increase in resignations since the reforms had been implemented. It would be instructive to compare levels of staff turnover against administrative data to investigate how far this impression is, in fact, correct. In the 2003/04 CSA Annual Report it was noted that ‘staff wastage at 14.9% has remained high’ (p. 15).

An EO described turnover as having been ‘very high’ since the implementation, at about one team member a month was estimated. It is interesting however that another manager commented that staff were only just finding the energy to look for work elsewhere and they expected resignations to increase over the coming months.

We were told that actual reductions in calls to the national helpline had been much smaller than predicted, leaving helpline staff overworked and trying to deal with callers from both old and new rules. Helpline staff felt increasingly marginalised, despite the fact that telephony is now central to the new system:

‘It’s interesting that in a telephony based new system, one group of people who have been marginalised are the people who are used to using the phone.’

(EO/HEO)

Just one manager reported that they felt that the reform had brought with it a change in attitude of their own managers; making the CSA more like a private enterprise. This person felt that the new focus had led to an increase workload.

Managers told us of some of the changes that had increased stress among their staff. The fact that work queues were so long, and that they could not hide some tasks whilst they worked on others did not help. The introduction of longer working hours was also a problem for some. Furthermore, in some Business Units the anticipation caused by delays in implementation had in effect left staff with further
to fall when things did not meet their high expectations. This eager anticipation was not uniform – one manager commented that their staff were apprehensive about the reforms because of the loss of expertise and a fear of job losses, and another noted that their team was worried by the poor training.

There were some comments that problems brought about with the change affected different staff disproportionately. One manager thought that staff who had been with the civil service for ten years or more were much more likely to complain about the changes, than new, younger staff. However, others felt that the stress was getting to everyone.

5.3 Experience of working with the new IT system

5.3.1 CS2

As part of the reform process a new computer system was introduced across every Business Unit, based on windows technology. This gave staff access to e-mail, intranet and windows based software, as well as a more modern point-and-click interface. Prior to this they had only ‘dumb terminals’ on their desks. Some of the staff that we spoke to had eagerly awaited this particular part of the reform.

5.3.2 AO grades

AO grades were overwhelmingly negative about the new computer system, CS2. It was the most widely discussed issue at every topic group, and undoubtedly the biggest change in the working lives of these officers. Even those who welcomed technological advancement were frustrated by the problems they were facing. Of all the people we spoke to, the most positive comment we heard was that it would be fine if it worked as well as it had in training, followed by acknowledgement that it might be easier for new staff familiar with windows based applications to work with CS2 rather than CSCS. One admitted that they were leaving the CSA despite being cautiously optimistic that CS2 could work well one day, because they weren’t prepared to ‘wait ten years’ for the necessary improvements (ten years was the approximate length of time this member of staff had been involved with the Agency and waiting for improvements, and they were making the point that there was no sign of a quick fix).

Staff had anticipated simplified legislation and a user friendly IT system to allow them to process cases quickly and accurately. Some told us they had been led to believe they would be getting touch screen technology. Instead they described a system with a multitude of problems not suited to their job and made worse in some instances, they felt, by insufficient, inadequate training:

‘I wonder who has designed it, because they obviously have not done my job, because it is not designed for the job that we do.’

(Focus group participant)
We heard from each focus group that the most frustrating thing about the design of CS2 was the lack of ‘notepad’. This feature of the old system was missed by everybody. It had been used by staff to jot freehand notes about calls and tasks, and was a useful summary when someone unfamiliar with the case took a phone call, attempted to proceed a case, or received a query. Staff felt strongly that at the very least it was vital to have somewhere to record notes about the most recent conversation with that client:

‘I’d have gone straight to the notepad to see was there anything on there to let me know. That’s 40 minutes out of my life and that’s 40 minutes out of her life and there’s going to be another 40 minutes wasted out of somebody’s life this afternoon when she phones back.’

The members of staff we spoke to were very frustrated by the speed of the new system. They felt embarrassed when they had to keep callers on hold whilst screens refreshed. We heard that a refresh time of 20 seconds was not unusual, and 10 minutes was not unheard of. One focus group told us that CS2 regularly slowed down mid-morning, when usage peaked.

In addition to complaints about the speed of the system we were told that the screens were ‘fussy’, hard to read, difficult to move around, and very small type. An example of the level of frustration with the system was the rather tongue in cheek comment that there were so many screens it seemed that the contractors must have expected to be paid per screen. This comment was made to illustrate to the facilitators the time wasted trying to access information and process details on the new system, due to the complexity of CS2.

It was clear from talking to staff that many errors were occurring. Most believed that these were largely system errors rather than operator errors, but there is acceptance that operator error exists, as would be expected with the large scale introduction of a new computing package. Furthermore, when people make mistakes on CS2 they can have large knock on effects. We were repeatedly told that operator error was impossible to correct – if the member of staff noticed that they had made a mistake they could not simply delete the entry and start again. Staff pointed out that even a simple thing like clicking the wrong button on the screen was enough to stop the case progressing. They were adamant that they had not been warned of these kinds of problems in training.

The CS2 system appears to be very date sensitive, and we assume that this is why the training received by staff included the concept of timelines. Unfortunately this is an area where it is both easy to make mistakes and probable that clients will give only partial information, perhaps saying that the separation happened 6 months ago, rather than giving a full date. As mentioned above, once a date is entered into the system it cannot be changed. Staff have found that cases are being held up simply because they don’t have an accurate date to enter. As an example of the level of frustration faced by staff because of this flaw in the system, one AO told us that they were putting in a false contact date to get the wage information to clear. This person was extremely concerned that by doing so they were breaking the law but was determined to get cases moving and knew of no other workaround that could help.
Other members of staff told us that they were entering false information to fill in unknown details so that they could get the system to continue with the case. For example, one admitted to entering old employer details knowing a client had changed jobs, just to keep the case active. It would seem from these examples that the staff are keen to do a good job, but may be in need of more focused management, possibly in association with reduced targets and time for consolidated learning.

When a case is stopped by an error for which there is no current workaround it is reported as an ‘incident’. Incidents are then prioritised by staff at Longbenton. A few AOs we spoke to had found ways of getting their incident reports marked as high priority, but it was far more common for staff to comment that reports were just sent to Longbenton and stockpiled. We were told that those categorised as below ‘Level 4’ were never even looked at whilst incidents that result in a complaint to a Member of Parliament were sent to a specialist team in Dudley, and three or four workarounds would be tried before they were sent elsewhere.

When the team in Longbenton have a solution to a problem they notify the member of staff, often by e-mail, giving them just one hour to try it. We were told that there is no allowance made for the possible time delay in receiving the email or the working hours of the member of staff who had reported the problem. Consequently, afternoon workers may have missed morning e-mails asking them to try out the solution and therefore lost the chance to get the case moving again. Furthermore, it appears that incident reports are simply deleted if the member of staff is unavailable to try the workaround. This effectively leaves the case stuck in the system once more. This appears to be a waste of resources and an ineffectual solution to the problems.

One member of staff who had tried workarounds provided by Longbenton was extremely frustrated by them, saying they were ‘useless’. They were so disappointed in the advice given that they questioned whether anybody actually read the problem report. This kind of comment was not uncommon – indicating the lack of real communication between the AOs across the Business Units and the Longbenton team trying to solve the numerous problems.

The reforms were intended to get money to more families with children, more quickly. With simplified calculations and the need for less information the reform was meant to speed up the process of calculation and increase compliance. Staff told us that the basic calculation is so straightforward they could do it in their head if necessary. Nevertheless they lacked confidence that CS2 would consistently calculate maintenance accurately:

‘You just enter it, you should be able to put it in. I have done it on a number of occasions, you go through and check how many children there are, what his pay scale is, is it coming up, you say ‘right it is £33’, press a button and it says £54, and you know it is wrong.’

(Focus group participant)
Several focus groups discussed the problems they were having with calculations on the computer system. This problem appeared to be widespread, and there was no indication that it was improving at the time we visited:

‘...but they’re talking about the problems they’re having with task eights, the assessment calculation task, and across all the Business Units they’re having the same problems and so it could be, I don’t know the exact figures but it could be about half of them that you can’t assess them or the assessment comes out incorrectly.’

(Focus group participant)

Most of those involved with calculations were checking CS2 calculations manually because they lacked confidence in the system, and some were attempting to use their calculations rather than those produced by CS2. The alternative was to send them off for official checks, which often resulted in them being processed clerically:

‘To check it – new clerical assessments – check that it’s correct. Sometimes you can push it through by putting a clerical assessment on the system. We just type in the values and put it through but apparently that causes problems sometimes for the accounts staff after that.’

(Focus group participant)

Staff found problems with other calculations too, and with some financial aspects of the new system. Arrears calculations were found to be wrong in one Business Unit, which they suspected was also a problem with dates. As one participant put it ‘if we were a bank we’d never have a customer’ because their financial calculations were not trustworthy. We were told that if a member of staff accidentally presses a button on the accounts screen they can be forced into a sequence of events that ends up in the wrong person receiving money. Conversely, if the CSA receives money from clients at unscheduled times, they have to repay it, because there is nothing built into the system to allow them to hold on to payments. Staff were unsure whether this was for legal reasons or was another flaw that needed rectifying.

The system is intended to create letters automatically, laying out the relevant details for clients. One of the disadvantages of this is that sometimes letters get sent without the staff having the opportunity to check them. We were also told that the system had difficulties providing accurate letters about phasing or deductions of earnings:

‘It can’t cope with phasing letters, could not originally cope with doing a deduction of earning order letter, those are our bread and butter to get money for the children, they are still going out wrong or not going out at all.’

(Focus group participant)

Staff told us that some simple tasks such as updating details, are not as straightforward as they could be. For example, helpline staff have found that since the introduction of CS2 helpline staff have not been able to access the part of the system that allows them to update address details. They either have to get the caller to ring
back, or find some other member of staff to process the caller’s details. This causes friction between different teams, and frustration for the client. We were also told that the system cannot cope with changes such as a child moving from the mother’s to the father’s care, or families where the children are split between mother and father.

A minority of the focus group participants were using CS2, to process old rules cases. They faced particular problems. The old rules were very complex, and there are many things that can go wrong. They were acutely aware that CS2 had never been designed to work on these cases.

The fact that the old computer system, CSCS, had been designed for a much more complicated set of rules had led many to speculate that it would be more than capable of dealing with new rules cases. One member of staff wondered why CSCS hadn’t been reprogrammed to process new rules cases. In other focus groups there seemed to be a strong myth circulating that some people were working on new rules cases on the old system. Several claimed to have done it themselves, but we understand that when cases are taken over to the old system, the actual calculation is done clerically, in a manual workaround.

### 5.3.3 EO and HEO grades

Some HEOs and EOs that we spoke to indicated that they were hopeful that CS2 could be improved and made to work well. One HEO commented that a year on it is a lot better, and another told us that they think that staff trust the information they get from CS2. Managers were far more likely than staff to make positive comments about the computer system when we started to discuss the subject with them, although they were also aware of the problems and discussed these in some detail. There are many possible reasons for their initial positivity, and it must be remembered that most are not trained or experienced at the same level of their staff in the use of CS2. Managers may have more information about the drive to improve the system and thus feel more hopeful, or may simply be conscious of their own position within the Agency and feel a certain amount of responsibility and loyalty to their employers.

Managers echoed staff frustration about the fallibility of the system, the likelihood of incorrect calculations and the number of cases being sent to be worked on clerically or to incidents teams. They also complained about the lack of a delete button for accidental errors and the problems faced by people working with old rules on the new system. They were aware of how slow the system could be, and one explained that staff were resorting to taking notes whilst clients were on the phone then filling in the relevant computer screens afterwards. In addition managers felt frustrated by the complexity of a system that was meant to be straight forward, and the lack of improvement in staff confidence as time moved on.

Staff were not overly concerned by the numbering of tasks in a non-sequential manner, but this was mentioned by one of the managers as a cause of frustration. They felt that the numbering may have been acceptable in development but not in a user friendly end product.
Another area of concern voiced primarily by management was the belief that CS2 would provide insufficient robust evidence for court cases. Notepad was one way in which evidence of previous conversations had been recorded in the past, although it was accepted by some managers that using print-offs of notepad could create issues of confidentiality and sensitivity as staff may have recorded comments which could reflect badly on the CSA. One HEO told us that they felt that notepad would not be needed once the system was running properly because the process would be smooth and straightforward.

We were told that issues with the payment facility on CS2 meant that payments were going out to the wrong person, or not going out at all. Similarly, payments were not coming in properly. It was taking weeks to get cases investigated and the lack of an edit facility meant that staff were powerless to move things forward themselves, even when they could see the problem. Apparently, in some Business Units the facility to deal with late payments did not come on line for 3 months after the introduction of CS2, and was finally introduced with no explanation or training on how to use it.

As a result of the host of problems, many cases were stuck in the system when we visited the Business Units. We were given estimates of between 40 and 50 per cent of new cases encountering a fault at some point during the process of getting money to the Parent With Care (PWC). Managers were starting to advise clients to make formal complaints, as they became aware that this was the only way that their cases would progress again. Unfortunately the original estimates of likely complaints had not included those stuck in the system; consequently the complaints teams were feeling desperately overworked.

As mentioned above a few managers did feel that things were beginning to improve. Some felt that the system was less likely to crash, and that screens were refreshing more quickly. One thought that whilst there was clearly a backlog of incidents, the level of incidents being reported had reduced. Some felt that further improvements could be made if staff made full use of the integral help facility, and stopped trying out their own workarounds. One HEO had heard that a great many fixes were due in the next six months and was hopeful that these would allow them to turn a corner and improve service. One manager, relatively new to the CSA, commented that he liked the alerts that come up on CS2 to remind you to check things such as a qualifying child who is about to become 19, and therefore no longer qualify.

5.4 Softphone, workflow and data warehouse

In addition to the introduction of a new computer system, staff were introduced to new telephony equipment and work distribution technology, and a new data collection system.
These three facilities automatically direct callers to the right member of staff (softphone), make sure all staff have similar workloads (workflow), and take regular measures of productivity (data warehouse). Managers can use the networked systems to look at the number of tasks in an operator’s queue, and track performance over a range of measures:

‘They did go into a lot of selling the fact that this was going to be the system, the top system in the whole of the world with the telephony, the work flow, all rolled into one. You would have your case load, the system would manage the case load for you so that you’d just come in on a morning, there would be your list of tasks, by the end of the day you would have finished them all because the system would know that’s how much you could do in a day and then you’d go home feeling really happy because you’d done a good day’s work. And that’s the impression that was coming out, it was like if we get this computer system right, this is what it will do for you.’

(EO/HEO)

In principle the changes to the CSA mean that staff need no longer deal with specific cases as caseworkers, but can process any kind of task for any client, and handle their queries without difficulty. They may receive in their queues work for a variety of clients, many of whose cases they will not have worked on previously. They should also receive a range of tasks as part of the move towards end-to-end working.

The telephony system, softphone, allows clients to tap in their National Insurance number, which is then used to identify a member of staff who can help them. We have been told that the system should first look to see if anyone is currently dealing with the clients case. If that person is unavailable it should route the call to someone else in their team. Failing that, it is meant to divert the call to someone else on the command, and the last resort is to put the call through to the national helpline staff. We were told in one Business Unit that softphone is not used in local offices, but this did not seem to be the case in every Business Unit we visited.

5.4.1 AO grades

Most members of staff at AO level spend their working day sat at their computer processing tasks, and therefore come into contact with workflow and softphone throughout the day. They have a queue of work to get through, which should reflect the team they are on and the number of hours they work. They are also responsible for taking direct calls from clients, which are fed to them through the computerised telephony and will override any other work they are doing. They must be available on the telephone for a proportion of the week (often 80 per cent of their working week, depending on the team) and they are required to process a number of different types of tasks to meet various targets. Helpline staff take general enquiries and those calls that are not successfully routed elsewhere. They must then try and find someone who can help, with the aid of the softphone technology which should indicate whether a particular member of staff is logged onto the system.
Workflow, which is responsible for work allocation, was not working properly in any of the seven Business Units, according to the staff we spoke to. We were told of enormous numbers of outstanding tasks being left in people’s queues on a daily basis, ranging from hundreds to over a thousand items waiting to be dealt with. Staff found it particularly distressing to be able to see the queue, and the sheer size of it meant that they did not seem to be making any inroads into their workload. Some claimed that if they processed one task several more would appear. Furthermore, work items were being sent to people who were on long-term sick leave, or were being stockpiled for those returning from holidays.

In one Business Unit, staff had decided to work overtime on Saturdays to try and clear their queues. However, this did not mean they were tackling outstanding tasks themselves. Rather, they were opening tasks and trying to find out who they ‘belonged to’. They suggested that it took between ten minutes and two hours to look at an item and decide where to send it. Sometimes, the work they redirected had originally gone to the wrong office, or even the wrong Business Unit. Other times they were sending tasks to people who had been working on the case previously. Some other Business Units were much less scrupulous about where they sent tasks to, and talked of simply ‘bouncing’ unwanted tasks to particular offices.

Other focus groups told us that they frequently received work items and phone calls meant for a different Business Unit. In one they told us that when they were unable to send cases to the right office they simply deleted them, not knowing whether or not they were duplicated in the appropriate Business Unit. In another they commented that the CSA website told parents to send completed claim forms to Hastings, and they wondered if this was the reason why clients got linked to the wrong Business Unit. One group had resorted to e-mailing the case workers in other Business Units, in the hope that they could reclaim their cases. These participants were frustrated because whilst they were e-mailing a colleague about one client, another client could get through to them on softphone, because they were forbidden from logging out of the system whilst they worked. We were told that there is only 30 seconds dead time between calls before the system activates again.

In every focus group we heard the same reason for work being misallocated. We were told that both the computer system and the helpline staff took any member of staff linked to a case for any reason, and immediately assumed it was that officer who was responsible for the case. So it seems that if a member of staff opened a case to look at it and realised that it was something they could not do, the software and helpline still associated them with the case.

Helpline staff told us that it can be difficult to find the right member of staff because of regular team changes, with staff changing desk, and consequently telephone number. The corporate directory was not up-to-date in all the Business Units, because of the frequent changes. They also pointed out that if a case had several members of staff working on outstanding tasks, they had no way of knowing which one would be best placed to answer a query. It was not clear from talking to helpline staff, what percentage of calls come straight to them for routeing and what
proportion are last ditch attempts by softphone to find an available operator. What was clear however was that the problem was causing a rift between helpline staff and other teams. Furthermore, operators were using loopholes to divert calls that were meant for them back to the helpline. Staff were trying various ploys to avoid calls, including talking to the helpline staff for over three minutes, which resulted in the loss of the caller, and giving out direct numbers linked to an answering machine asking callers to call the helpline. Helpline staff had developed some tactical moves of their own, such as calling staff and then hanging up with the external caller still connected so that the staff thought they were taking an internal call when actually they had a client wanting to speak to them.

In one Business Unit, staff told us that they found out that the reason calls were not being directed properly was that of 900 softphone terminals only 60 were working. Not surprisingly those with the working phones were being inundated with callers.

Newer operators told us that they weren’t always sure whether work was for them or not. One had been doing all the work sent their way without any censoring and had been left with an unmanageable backlog of tasks to complete:

‘I didn’t even know…I was just taking any call that came through to me and I was like ‘OK I will do it for you, I will help you’, and then people were – three months down the line when I had a huge pile of work, people were like ‘well this doesn’t belong to you why have you got this’, I had no idea that there were different parts that did different things.’

(Focus group participant)

When staff do accept responsibility for a case there is no guarantee that they will get to work on it without disruption. It was mentioned to us several times that operators could be part way through processing a task only for it to disappear, never to be seen again. Nobody seemed quite sure why this would happen, and some told us that the work would then come back the following day. One told us that they could take a phone call, discuss with the caller what they would do to progress the case, and then find that as soon as they hung up the case had disappeared from their screen, leaving them unable to action it.

The workflow system does not take into account the complex issue of linked cases. When a member of staff is dealing with a case that is linked to several others, they can spend a considerable amount of time contacting all the other operators involved in dealing with cases linked to theirs. Imagine for example a PWC with three children each with different fathers, who puts in a new claim when her most recent relationship breaks down. All the cases relating to those fathers, potentially including other children and other PWCs, will need re-assessing when the new claim comes in. Some members of staff felt that the most efficient way to deal with these kinds of cases was to force all the workflow items to go to one person, so that they could find out everything they needed to know and monitor the overall progress properly. We were told that currently a member of staff could perhaps have to liaise with 30 other officers to progress a linked case.
The telephony has its own ‘pulse’ to collect data about the length of time a member of staff has been logged into the system. Some staff particularly disliked this aspect of the job, and found various ways to avoid taking calls regularly, including turning down their ringers, or leaving one part of the system logged in whilst they were away from their desk. We were told that in some teams, AOs had to explain themselves if they were not on the telephone for the required proportion of the day and may have even been asked to provide a written explanation. Others told us that very little notice was being taken of this requirement, and they could easily get away with not being on the phone all day.

It must be noted that the reasons for disliking phone contact are mostly linked to the unpredictability of the call and the emotional drain of dealing with many distressed parents, rather than the computer software. This is naturally made worse when clients have reason to complain, described by some as an ‘escalated call’. We also discovered that some members of staff had made a choice to move to teams that had less direct contact in order to avoid phone contact, only to be told they were now responsible for ringing clients rather than writing to them. There was a sense among these members of staff that they were about to reach burnout, and the thought of returning to the phones brought on feelings of panic.

### 5.4.2 EO and HEO grades

It was clear from talking to the managers that they were under the impression that softphone, workflow and data warehouse were not intended to be seen as separate packages, and had not been expected to have provided their own intrinsic problems. It had been anticipated that everyone would accept the new IT package as a unified system, the ‘new way’. They felt that it was only because of problems that staff became aware of the various components:

> ‘There is problems with the telephony which are separate from problems with the computer system. In the run up to the original, provisional date for the change they just saw it as the new system.’

(EO/HEO)

Most of the managers had a view of the three packages that was rather different from that of the AOs. As they all have the potential to provide valuable management data, and allow them to control some aspects of productivity, they seemed to be largely welcomed. Many of the managers were, however, aware of current difficulties, and the resultant frustration suffered by their teams, even if they didn’t share all of their grievances.

An EO told us that they liked the greater transparency of the new system, with the IT, and workflow in particular, allowing them to see what was happening on cases, and what work was outstanding. This team leader used the information to find work to do as overtime, as they needed the extra money. It is noteworthy that this person was under the impression that despite the fact that there is more flexibility for EOs view and action cases (but not correct mistakes), they shouldn’t be doing this
because it was against the rules. It seems unfortunate that there is any feeling of guilt attached to getting extra work done.

Workflow was praised by an HEO we spoke to because of the ease with which EOs could check their team’s progress, and help them to manage their work. It had enabled them to ask ‘why not?’ if work was not being cleared and to address small problems before they became bigger issues. This HEO noted that when they were an EO ‘to be honest I would have been bored a lot of the time if I didn’t have workflow to look at.’

Managers did not always share their staff’s perception of the telephony. One told us that if only two members of staff were on the softphone system it was fair enough that they should take all the calls, even if they were frustrated that they were prevented from processing cases. Another claimed that most calls did go through to the right person. Others told us of their frustration with staff who looked for loopholes to get out of talking to people, including logging unsuccessful outbound calls at times when they knew the client would be out so that they could send a letter instead of having a conversation. It was noted by some that they were beginning to overcome this behaviour using better monitoring, and that new staff were less likely to be so negative towards telephone contact.

One HEO, sympathetic to the frustrations of their staff, noted that frontline staff were unlikely to feel confident on the phone until they were fully supported by the IT system. They could not provide a good level of service if the computer system kept failing them. This person felt that the fact that staff were still unwilling to use the phones properly after a year on the new system should ring alarm bells. Other sympathetic managers noted that staff who took calls that were not meant for them could not access the information needed to deal with the caller professionally, and that both staff morale and standards of customer service fell as a result.

We were told that when tasks relating to the same case were completed in different offices there was a potential for things to get out of sequence and a likelihood of the duplication of effort. This echoed some of the comments made in focus groups, and suggests that workflow does not properly create tasks consecutively, and may be creating more than one task at once.

It was noted by one interviewee that if there was a problem with the computer system which resulted in an ‘incident’ on a particular case, workflow would take those tasks out of the queue. However this did not prevent callers being put through, if the officer had been linked to the case.

5.5 Interface with Jobcentre Plus

Parents with Care (PWCs) on benefits must make a claim for child support, unless they have a good reason to avoid doing so (good cause). They often fill in their child support claim at a Jobcentre Plus office, with the help of local staff. Once the form is completed the information is electronically transferred to the CSA, via the ‘Interface’.
Staff and managers told us that they were having problems with data coming from Jobcentre Plus via the Interface. The information being received by the CSA was often wrong or incomplete, and had resulted in some members of staff contacting the wrong person. Some had thought this was because the Jobcentre Plus staff resented having to do what they saw as CSA work, whilst others believed it was a problem with the technology behind the Interface. In one focus group the participants felt that the Jobcentre Plus staff were probably just in need of training, and in another it was suggested that there should be joint training for CSA and Jobcentre Plus staff. In another focus group it was pointed out that the relevant staff did not have access to the main database, and have to rely on their hand written notes.

Using the Jobcentre Plus to begin the child support claim should help to speed up the process, and provide a face-to-face officer to explain the form to the parent and check for accuracy. However it does mean that the CSA is reliant on the Jobcentre Plus understanding of the significance of the information gathered, and the importance of the work they are doing in providing the initial details:

‘Well in theory it should work better because they’re doing part of our job for us by putting some of the information in while they’ve got the parent with care or the non-resident parent there but basically the problems we’re having is they’re putting wrong information in there, they’re putting misspelling or whatever it is. Of course it’s coming to us and we’re just carrying on and we thought, hang on, and we can’t change it.’

(Focus group participant)

Incorrect data can have significant and serious consequences. Misspelling names, or estimating dates can lead to a claim being addressed to the wrong person. Whether mistakes are a result of Jobcentre Plus staff or computer problems the end result is the same:

‘If they [Jobcentre Plus staff] do not have the date of birth for the ex-partner they cannot actually clear that piece of work until they enter a date of birth, so they enter a date of birth, …if that person enters 01/01/70 and we get an exact match then the computer system is already allocated to somebody of the same name born 01/01/70. That constitutes what appears to be a confident trace. If you then try and contact that person and you cannot get them on the phone you send out a form that drops through their letter box…… 7 working days down the line their employer has been contacted, they have got their wage details, all of this is in breach of data protection, and part of the human rights as well probably.’

(EO/HEO)

Although the end result is the same, the problem can only be addressed properly once the cause has been identified. In just one area, staff told us that they had tried to test the Interface system. They had found that even when CSA staff saw the correct information being entered, 50 per cent of it was coming through wrong. Furthermore they had discovered that the task of completing the CSA form and
processing the information is important to the Jobcentre Plus staff, since it has to be right for their paperwork. They felt that under these circumstances it was unlikely that the Jobcentre Plus staff would purposely enter the wrong details:

‘...our AO has meetings, regular meetings with Jobcentres, this was the last one they had, and they were saying about the Interface and the stuff coming back wrong so they tested it, as far as I know it’s the first time they’ve thought to test it and this was like last week.’

Facilitator: ‘test the interface?’

‘Yes. And 50 per cent, even though the Jobcentre staff were putting in the right details, 50 per cent of them were coming back wrong.’

(Focus group participant)

Staff are encouraged to contact clients by phone whenever possible, so it causes particular difficulties if they are not provided with a telephone number as part of the contact details. We heard that this was one aspect of the Interface data transfer process that was not working properly:

‘I heard yesterday all the telephone numbers coming over get wiped off somehow, that’s why there is so many without PWC telephone numbers on. It has been removed somehow coming across the Interface. We thought they were not doing their job properly and we were getting very resentful, but it’s the system.’

(Focus group participant)

Whatever the cause of the poor information being provided by the Jobcentre Plus, the whole situation is exacerbated because the CSA staff cannot correct information once it is on their system. The only way it can be corrected is to close the case and open a new one. We were told that if the case is linked to others this means stripping every case off the system and restarting them all. In one focus group it was suggested that this process might cost £1,000 a time.

One HEO told us that as a result of the poor information coming through the Interface for benefits cases staff did not like to process these cases. Another manager told us that private cases get priority over benefits cases because those private PWCs are not getting any money at all. (Elsewhere a stern directive had been received insisting that they try to improve the number of benefits cases completed). Whichever is the more likely reason for preferring to process private cases over benefits cases it is apparent that some PWCs will not be receiving the premium of £10 per week that they are entitled to as quickly as they might.

Possibly of greater concern is that some focus group participants overlooked the £10 premium when discussing the Interface. As a result they suggested that the problems, whilst being frustrating, made no material difference to PWCs on benefits, because they were already in receipt of their benefits.
We heard that from one focus group that staff had started to deal with Jobcentre Plus staff via email, because they were not confident using the information from the Interface. We believe this must be problematic since we later discovered that the Interface transfer is an important component in the overall computer system.

The Interface is not available in smaller job centres, only Jobcentre Plus offices. We were told that if a member of staff from the agency helps a PWC to complete a form in any other kind of office the form should be sent to the Jobcentre Plus for processing. We heard that this was not happening initially because the Jobcentre Plus staff were sending the forms straight to the CSA:

‘...not all the Job Centres are Job Centre Pluses so when a parent with care fills out her form with a visiting officer it goes back to the office, if it’s not a Jobcentre Plus, if it hasn’t got the Interface it has to go through one of the other offices to do it. They didn’t, nobody told them about that so they sent the forms to us, or they sent them to Basingstoke or they sent them to Bristol or Taunton, so each of the offices has a little pile.’

(Focus group participant)

The problems with the Interface are particularly frustrating when a PWC is looking to return to work. If her (or less commonly his) case is held up because of incorrect information from the Interface she cannot access the full amount of child support once she starts work. This works as a disincentive to return to work, and can force families to remain in poverty:

‘I get calls from New Deal Young Parent Advisors, parents with are looking to go back to work and we have a lot of MAFs that have not gone through, they’ve been stock piled in different pots so there’s a lot of very angry ladies out there who are waiting for their cases to be actioned.’

(Focus group participant)

Some staff also believed there were problems in terms of data protection, with the information that came through the Interface. The information received often included the level of benefits, even though, as they understood it, this information is meant to be confidential. It seems unlikely there is a strong legal data protection issue, but suggests that staff are rightly conscious of the sensitivity of much of the information they receive.

5.6 Operational issues

Staff and managers talked about some of the recent issues that affected their work, and some problems that they felt could be solved by better communication or dealt with by improvements to the IT. It is difficult to neatly categorise these problems into computer and regulation problems as they have characteristics of both.

As an example of poor communication we heard what happened when face-to-face staff had been called into one Business Unit to help with the backlog of work, leaving nobody in local offices to go out to clients. Apparently some clients were still being
offered the opportunity to talk with face-to-face officers during this time (as per CSA policy), even though there was actually no-one available to make an appointment with. Furthermore, the face-to-face staff were told that they would have to reapply for their original jobs once they had helped to clear the office work.

Managers and staff told us of several areas where the system was unable to cope with variations from the norm. For example, we were told that staff from one Business Unit were asked to go to Longbenton to process ‘role reversal’ cases (where the Non-resident Parent (NRP) becomes the PWC and vice versa) because it had become apparent that there were many of them. They needed processing clerically because the IT couldn’t cope with them. The same respondent also pointed out that the system cannot cope if the NRP has two or more children sleeping over for different numbers of nights. However it should be noted that staff also told us that on the old system all overnight stays were dealt with clerically, whereas CS2 can cope with calculations that include more straightforward overnight stays.

The abundance of linked cases, particularly when they are linked across Business Units has caused problems on CS2 according to the people we spoke to. In addition to the obvious links caused by re-partnering and repeated relationship breakdown, it seems that links are still considered to be active on the system even once the qualifying children grow up, or when a case is left dormant for many years. This is seen as an issue that can only get worse as the CSA gets older, and more children of parents in the system become parents themselves. Links in cases require very careful management and also result in old cases being forcibly migrated to the new system.

Another issue that is causing concern is the flexibility to change details and payments when a PWC returns to work. This is a critical time, and it is vitally important that the parent does not miss out on any child support payments, if lone parents are to be both encouraged and supported in getting back to paid work. Staff in one Business Unit told us they were unclear whether this kind of case should be done clerically to speed things up.

As part of the reforms, NRPs can initiate the claim. We were told that some had heard that this was possible and were choosing to do this, as a way of getting their ex-partner ‘off their backs’ or in order to pay less. Some members of staff were also encouraging NRP callers who rang for information to do this. Additionally, in one Business Unit we were told that some NRPs had even talked to staff about how they were putting off leaving their partners until they were sure they would be on the new rules, and therefore liable to smaller payments. However, despite there being a clear demand for some NRP-led claims we heard that there were no forms designed for NRPs. As a result all NRP initiated claims were being sent to the Sapphire team to be completed clerically.

One Business Unit told us that there was a stockpile of forms in one of their offices. It would appear that this is a result of some staff waiting to put clients on the new system, but those we spoke to had only become aware of the issue when they started receiving paper forms six months after they had completed the calculation. Although they had clearly managed to process some of the cases, they were under
the impression that many thousands of applications have never been put on any system, but were simply being stored somewhere.
6 Client interactions

Key messages

It was relatively unusual to hear from staff about positive feedback from clients. Those who had been thanked were clearly pleased to have helped, and highly valued the thank you (generally more so than any internal congratulations). Internal channels that let staff know when clients are grateful to them are important, and seem to be working well to provide positive messages that can be used to increase morale.

Staff and managers were used to dealing with disappointed, angry and frustrated callers. It helped some to know that they did not live in the same town as the clients, as callers could become quite threatening. It would be valuable to discuss with staff whether the Agency could do more to ensure that none of their clients live locally. It may be that once the system issues are addressed much of the frustration felt by clients will be reduced, but staff are currently under a great deal of stress, and this may be one way to reduce some of the pressure on them.

We did not find that the clients we spoke to had particularly high expectations in relation to the speed of the service, but they did talk about being disappointed when staff failed to keep promises to call back. Most of the clients we spoke to were largely unaware of the content of the reforms, and had only a basic understanding of the calculations, but as time progresses new clients may become increasingly aware of the rules (for example they may have heard about the experiences of friends or colleagues). This may also affect expectations in due course.

It would be valuable to compare complaints about the calculation, as opposed to the service. If Non-resident Parents (NRPs) are less likely to contest the decision on the new rules, as seems to be the case, there is potential to increase compliance levels. However only a relatively small number of calculations had been completed (at the time of the research), and the weight of complaints about the system errors may have caused staff to overlook other kinds of dissatisfaction.
6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 AO grades

A minority of staff reported having generally positive experiences of dealing with clients. One had received two thank you letters from Parents with Care (PWCs), which were put on the Child Support Agency (CSA) intranet; they were also given a £150 bonus.

In some Business Units we spoke to staff who felt there were advantages to working with clients who did not live locally. In Business Units elsewhere the problem of coming face-to-face with clients in the street was of real concern to staff. One had been threatened by a client, who said he would cut off the member of staff’s nose. These kinds of threats had added emphasis in small towns, and were not taken lightly by the staff involved.

Staff deal with members of the public every day and it is inevitable that they will hear complaints and frustrations as part of their job. One member of staff noted that the frustrated clients don’t really mean to shout at the operators, but that as problems persist, they become the faceless representatives of the agency. Some did believe that clients understood why things went wrong and believed them when they were told that the CSA was having IT problems, but others felt that all they cared about was the money and assumed that whatever they said about the problems were just excuses:

‘One man shouted at me and said ‘I am fed up with you all blaming the tools. It’s all your fault. You are rubbish at what you do’.’

(Focus group participant)

‘They think we are incompetent basically. They don’t believe it’s the computer.’

(Focus group participant)

There may be advantages to hiring staff with varied life experiences, who can empathise with clients. Some of the operators we spoke to acknowledged that they had friends or family in similar situations to their clients and fully understood the complexity of their lives. Indeed, some staff are themselves clients of the CSA. An older member of staff commented that some of the younger staff were uncomfortable with the level of detail elicited in conversations with clients. This operator said that it was not uncommon for people to discuss their relationships, sex life and financial situation with staff, and felt that some young people are not ready for this kind of frankness. We did not, however, encounter anyone who claimed to be uncomfortable with this aspect of customer service. Discomfort was most likely to be blamed on difficult conversations caused by problems with the new computer system, or a non-compliant ex-partner.
Staff told us that their clients complained that they had been put through to the wrong office on occasions and were frustrated about the length of time they had been kept waiting on the phone. This problem was reiterated during the client interviews (Part 2). We were told that this often resulted in clients insisting that they were put on hold until somebody could be found to help with their case, because they did not believe that anyone would call back, and they did not want to have to go through the whole process of calling again. Furthermore, they sometimes would refuse to repeat information that they had given previously, preferring to give a long list of all the people they had spoken to in relation to their claim.

We found that there were several situations where staff were under the distinct impression that they were expected to say only certain things; they sometimes did not follow these supposed guidelines. For example, they told us they had been asked not to mention to clients that the Agency was having problems with the IT, but they clearly did not like the resulting insinuation that it was the staff rather than the computer system that was at fault. In this case they clearly were prepared to let clients know why their case was being held up. Staff were also of the opinion that they were forbidden from telling NRPs that the reason for a claim was that the parent with care was on benefits. In one Business Unit staff told us that the ‘Benefits Agency’ had told them they must only suggest that ‘if perhaps she has claimed a benefit, then she is a mandatory client’ when an NRP asked why the claim had been activated. Staff did not express discomfort with the principal of protecting information, but appeared unhappy being given certain phrases to use. It appears that staff we spoke to were keeping this information private from the NRP, and this is backed up by the client interviews. It is valuable to note here that we have concluded from the client interviews that it would be in most people’s interest for the NRP to be made aware of the reason for a claim, rather than being left to come to their own conclusions.

Staff told us that clients had also heard that the reforms were meant to speed up the process and were therefore unhappy when their case dragged on; pointing out that they were told that cases should take six weeks, not six months. Staff in some focus groups felt that this made clients more angry than before and even aggressive because their expectations had been raised. Some clients were also confused because staff had told them that they were on the new computer system, and yet they were not on the new rules. This led to more frustration. We did not find much evidence of raised expectations among the clients we spoke to, but it is perhaps understandable that this kind of client would be more likely to make a complaint to staff than those who did not expect speedy delivery from the Agency. It is not surprising that staff would comment on such a conversation with clients, as these kind of views may well have been unexpected to them, given the previous bad press that the CSA had received.

6.1.2 EO and HEO grades

We were told that clients on the whole seemed less likely to contest the maintenance decision on the new rules than they had on the old. It may be that this is simply a
result of the relatively small number of calculations completed on the new scheme when we visited. However, there was also a perception that clients felt much more at ease with the calculation and we were told that some clients could talk the staff through the new rules – a complete turnaround from the complexity of the old scheme. (One manager thought this a small disadvantage, commenting wryly that callers who knew everything were harder to deal with than general complainers). It was acknowledged that some clients did say thank you, and managers felt that some did recognise that the problems were not the fault of the staff on the frontline.

Managers noted that some staff did not like talking to clients. One manager felt that a change of culture in relation to phone usage was needed before any new scheme could be implemented effectively. This person commented that ‘if they [their staff] spent as much time doing their work as they do finding ways round not speaking to the clients, we’d be miles ahead of the game’. In one Business Unit they had attempted to overcome this by advertising for a telephony coach. It was not clear whether one was appointed, but we did not speak to anyone who felt they had been trained to use the telephone. An EO told us that there was also a specific need for training in relation to callers threatening suicide, because at present they felt they were forced to make difficult judgements on whether to pass the caller on to a trained person who could deal with such threats.

All the managers were very aware of the reasons for staff avoiding client contact. We were told that they found it difficult when clients asked questions that they couldn’t answer (usually because the IT wasn’t working or the caller was through to the wrong person), and when the system prevented them from progressing the case. They knew that callers were being put on hold for long periods of time and were understandably frustrated when they got through to someone. They were also aware that staffing issues meant that many of the calls from working parents were received when staffing was at its lowest, causing increased frustration. One manager echoed a comment made by staff, that frustrated clients may refuse to put the phone down until they have spoken to someone who can help them, because they do not believe that anyone will call back. It was also pointed out that some teams were much more likely to take distressing calls; the enforcement team, for example, often had callers who were either tearful or abusive.

It was common for EOs and HEOs to note the importance of avoiding escalating complaints, whilst acknowledging that complaining generally helped a client to speed up their case. Some managers were taking complaints calls themselves as a way of calming the client and reassuring them that everything possible was being done to move their case on. Some were asking staff to prioritise cases where the client had commented that they were unhappy with the service, sometimes in order to prevent the case getting to the ombudsman.

One manager was working well beyond the call of duty to appease frustrated clients, and was particularly concerned about those who were not receiving payments. They were giving a (works) mobile-phone number to clients in case of problems, and even taking calls at home at weekends. This manager told us that
they can’t believe how well clients have reacted to the problems, saying ‘they’ve worked with us on it’.

Most of the complaints received appeared to be about the level of service received whether or not this was related to the problems with the computer system, but some clients were commenting to staff and managers about the legislation. We heard that PWCs were complaining that it was very unfair that their ex-partner could use other people’s children (i.e. the children of a new partner) to bring down the maintenance calculation.

One HEO told us that some clients, who had originally applied for maintenance under the old rules, had withdrawn their application in order to reapply under the new rules on the understanding that they would be better off as a result. Unfortunately for them, we were told that this does not work because the system still sees the original claim, and tries to migrate it over.

Managers in a few Business Units talked to us about the expectations of clients, and others they dealt with. They generally felt that client expectations had risen with the introduction of the new scheme, and that if their cases were not progressing they now needed to be made aware of that and told to make a formal complaint if they were unhappy. The term ‘managing expectations’ was used by several managers; one elaborated that staff could do this better by not promising things that they could not do, such as calling back at a certain time.
7 Staff morale

Key messages

Morale was generally low among the staff we spoke to, and they reported that their colleagues were also suffering from stress. Most managers appeared more able to deal with the levels of stress but a few acknowledged that they were also finding it very difficult to cope. A few managers did feel that they were improving morale by trying to lighten the atmosphere in their teams, and there may be scope to encourage more managers to look at ways of reducing the problems faced by their staff.

The main causes of the high levels of stress and low morale appeared to be the failings of the computer system, combined with a lack of experience since the reforms were implemented and a lack of support from colleagues. Bitterness towards colleagues was particularly noticeable where teams required information from elsewhere in the Agency. Frustration was also apparent in relation to team targets, where remaining staff in depleted teams felt obliged to meet targets intended for complete teams.

It is clear that significant changes to the computer system are a necessary part in bringing about a big shift in morale, since the problems that staff face on a day-to-day basis are largely system based. One of the most fundamental improvements would be the reintroduction of a free text ‘notepad’ facility. This would improve morale in two ways: firstly it would make their job slightly easier, and secondly it would make staff realise that their complaints (and ‘stories’) had been heard – an important message.

The levels of bitterness between staff can also be addressed by considering the kinds of targets used to incentivise staff, and working with different areas of the business to create a better level of understanding between teams. Clearly targets can be used to recognise and reward excellent performance but some of the ones discussed by staff were causing friction and stress.

It was noticeable that participants of the focus groups appreciated being involved. This indicates that it might be worth considering the creation of regular forum sessions where staff from different teams can address pertinent issues and feed back concerns and/or possible solutions to senior management.
7.1 Introduction

As noted above, Child Support Agency (CSA) staff have undergone a considerable number of changes over the last year and a half. They have learned new skills, including the use of new IT equipment. They have taken on board changes to Agency regulations and attempted to implement these changes smoothly and professionally for the benefit of their clients. Their teams were split up and regrouped, leaving them without the support network of familiar colleagues at a time when they perhaps needed it most. They have seen changes to their roles, from having particular client cases for which they were responsible (based on an alphabetic split by surname) to being expected to take any call and any task. The much quoted target for turnover of cases is much shorter than it was, at just six weeks, and the pressure is on staff from clients, management and the Government to meet these targets.

7.1.1 AO Grades

Because participants had volunteered to take part in this research, we asked them whether they would classify themselves as more, or less, negative than their non-participating colleagues. The consensus was that they were less negative, and more able to cope than some of their co-workers; hence they felt they were able to take part. Despite their self-confessed positive attitude, their descriptions of the levels of morale across their teams and commands were very disturbing. The overwhelming message from staff was that morale was so bad that the vast majority of Administrative Officers (AOs) in the CSA were looking to leave. One gave the figure at 80 per cent. Furthermore, many of those members of staff remaining were taking long-term sick leave because the level of stress was so high they could no longer cope:

‘People are dropping off with stress like flies in the new client team.’

(Focus group participant)

‘It’s hell, really torture.’

(Focus group participant)

Some felt that the levels of stress were caused primarily by their lack of experience on the new computer system, and the fact that it had so many problems. They believed it was the inability to work effectively that made staff unhappy. This was especially acute for long serving staff who felt robbed of their experience with the introduction of the new IT system. Staff also felt that the job had got harder, particularly with end-to-end working, and that their pay levels did not reflect this.

Staff also felt that the increasing emphasis on targets was to blame for the low morale. This was made worse in at least one Business Unit by the refusal of some people to do some of the tasks required. Where this happened within a team the other team members were left trying to meet the team’s targets and get their own
work done. This was also the case when staff were off sick, increasing the pressure on those remaining.

Telephone calls were also blamed by several participants for the increasing levels of stress. Staff complained that those who couldn’t cope were simply not answering the phone, or were picking up and hanging up. Clearly this increased the pressure on those around them.

The high levels of stress were clearly visible to members of staff. One commented that every single day someone in their office would be crying through stress and frustration; they assured us they were not exaggerating this point. They described a kind of panic brought on when the phones never stopped and they could only tell clients that there was nothing they could do. Others told us that all kinds of members of staff were succumbing to tears: male and female, old and young, experienced and new.

Two of the focus group participants we spoke to who described themselves as people who did not take sick leave, and had not previously looked to move on, were now in the process of leaving. One was tempted to take sick leave until they found another job, partly to highlight the problems they were facing. Conversely, we spoke to one person who had left the Agency to work in a call centre, but returned after deciding that the CSA was the better option. Other staff with experience of call centres, such as in telecoms also felt they were very stressful environments.

Staff were generally aware of the arguments used by higher management to justify the levels of stress – in particular the message that civil servants were well known for resisting change. They told us that it was not the changes themselves that caused their colleagues to leave in droves, it was the lack of improvement brought by those changes.

One of the effects of low morale was that staff were less supportive of one another, and friction was building up between different areas of the agency. One member of staff explained it as a way of shifting the blame. We also heard comments that it was better for ‘the others’, whether this was another team, or a different office or Business Unit.

Some teams needed specific information from others to complete their work. We were told for example that debt and enforcement teams were putting pressure on other staff to provide particular pieces of information. Enforcement in particular caused tension because of their need for accurate documentation, in order to get cases ready for court. The general feeling was that by preparing this information the other teams were doing the enforcement work for them. This is reminiscent of the widespread problem of the ‘them and us’ mentality that was apparent in the offices when we visited.

In some Business Units staff talked about the new extended hours contracts. We were told that the pay calculation was different for these employees (higher basic but no pay for lunch breaks etc.), and the level of commitment of the staff coming in
on these contracts was perceived as lower. This is a regular feature of some kinds of shift working pattern in other types of organisation. Again, this may simply be part of the overall feeling of them and us, or it may reflect the difference in types of people drawn to flexible working and standard office hours.

Some members of staff commented that they appreciated being part of this research, and were clearly pleased to have the opportunity to tell us about the problems they were facing. One had come in specially to speak to us, and others had travelled relatively long distances. They were generally hopeful that someone would take notice of their concerns, although a few voiced reservations that anything would change.

7.1.2 EO and HEO Grades

Managers talked to us about their own levels of stress and that of their staff. It was apparent that some managers thrived on the pressure that caused stress in others. Others did not feel the tension because they did not have tight deadlines. Still others were at least as stressed as their staff, if not more so.

One manager told us that they told staff that their morale was low too, and that they felt close to exploding. Even so this manager acknowledged that to some extent when everything possible had been tried there was no point worrying. An EO told us that they saw it as the manager’s responsibility to keep morale up by staying cheerful:

‘To me when I walk into where we work, you come through the double doors and my team’s on the left and to me it’s like walking onto a stage, because I know as soon as I walk through the door, they can see what I’m like for the day. I always go 3, 2, 1 and it’s like I’ve got to be happy all day..’

(EO/HEO)

‘Yes, it’s coming up again now [staff morale]. I try my utmost to keep them going with bonuses or... just laugh and joke, taking any problems away from them as much as I can.’

(EO/HEO)

Some managers commented on the cause of their own stress. For one it was the requirement to ‘whip up’ staff to hit targets, and the pressure to be accountable for things over which they had no control. For others it was the lack of hope that things would get better. One commented that their job was not fun in the way it had been. Some were under intense pressure from their own line managers and above; one had been threatened with the sack, and given just five days to turn around their team’s performance.
There was some disappointment with staff voiced by managers. Some found it frustrating that there was a ‘can’t do’ attitude, and that staff weren’t prepared to learn more on the job:

‘From what I can hear they’re always up for more training, but we’ve given them what we think is sufficient training.’

(EO/HEO)

We were told that the management in one Business Unit had been trying for four years to get staff used to the idea that change can be good, but even they were now beginning to feel that some things should remain stable.

One manager noted that there were many alternative jobs for staff to move to. They were highly skilled for their wage level and could easily find alternative, less stressful positions, some within the civil service. This was not the case in all the Business Units, and some managers were of the opinion that the stress levels in other workplaces would be no different. Note however that it was also pointed out that some of the staff who left were actually not very good at their job, and so not such a great loss. Of course it is possible that this is the standard response to concerns of staff turnover, but it may also include a grain of truth.

Several managers commented that morale had been better before the reforms and for the first few months after A day, when staff were still hopeful that the new system would be an improvement. One however felt morale had hit an all time low last Easter when it felt like it was tearing the agency apart, and is now much better. This HEO also commented that the improvement is fragile – a ‘fragile truce’, and there may still be movement out of the Agency now the staff have the energy to search for a new job. In some Business Units, managers felt that the morale of the workforce was still falling, because long-term prospects looked bleak, and one commented that it was getting worse by the day, and was lower than they could have ever imagined.

In some offices it seems that there was a siege mentality when things were at their worst, and people supported each other. Sometimes this meant that teams became either fiercely competitive or hostile towards one another. In others the experience of change was very isolating, with staff’s head’s down, slogging away alone and increased levels of friction:

‘Ironically a lot of problems are caused by other areas of the Business. You wouldn’t believe it, it’s horrendous.’

(EO/HEO)

It was not obvious from talking to managers what caused this difference, although one who felt that their teams had pulled together claimed to have used bonuses and jokes to increase morale.
8 Management, performance and productivity

Key messages

Each grade was sceptical of the level of understanding of those above. This appeared to be the result of a lack of dialogue either about discussions with other grades, or directly between higher and lower grades.

In addition to a strong sense of hierarchy, there was a reluctance to participate in free and frank conversation when different grades met. As a result information is moving more slowly than it might and is being filtered as it passes between levels.

Neither staff nor management indicated that they disapproved of the idea of target setting. They were however of the opinion that there were too many targets in use and that some of them were causing unwanted side-effects on behaviour. There was an understanding that performance must be measured accurately in order to provide the right kind of monitoring and feedback but less thought seemed to have been given to how the feedback would be used to encourage staff to meet expectations.

It would appear that the Agency has recognised some of the problems that we discovered in relation to target setting. The balanced score card approach appears to address the issue of multiple targets. However there will continue to be a need for careful monitoring to prevent distorted behaviour (or ‘cheating’). It is possible that managers would be better placed to prevent unwanted behaviour if their own performance was not dependent on team targets. At present they appear to be condoning schemes devised by staff to improve statistics.
Team targets may encourage joint effort but they also require joint effort. This was said to be simply not possible with the current level of absence within the Agency, putting strain on the remaining members of a team. It is important to ask staff why they are opting out of some of the schemes devised to improve productivity. If the incentive is not powerful enough to encourage the level of effort required then other options will need to be considered in order to ensure that all aspects of the business are being attended to.

8.1 Introduction

In this section of the report we review the evidence gathered relating to staff and system management, and their effects on performance and productivity. A large element within this relates to the setting of performance targets, and the implications this has for staff approach to their working. However, it is worth noting that the system of targets to which Child Support Agency (CSA) works is being developed. The Child Support Agency Business Plan 2003/2004 provides for a greater focus on targets relating to cash and cash compliance, and the development of targets relating to ‘customer perceptions’ of the CSA. This document also highlights progress towards supporting staff through training and other assistance with personal development.

The research with staff was conducted in Spring 2004, and hence the interviews and focus groups relate to the experience up to that point.

8.2 Management

Staff spoke to us about their relationship with their immediate line managers, and those above them. The Executive Officer (EO) and Higher Executive Officer (HEO) participants discussed their position within the agency, and their own perceptions of senior management. It was clear that the Agency is very hierarchical and we were given the firm impression that each grade deals almost exclusively with the grade immediately above and below.

8.2.1 AO responses

Most focus group participants felt that their immediate line manager was aware of the pressures they were under. One expressed how they felt supported, and said they were able to take a break when things got too much. But staff doubted whether senior managers were being told how they felt. Indeed there was a sense among some of the staff we spoke to that the higher the management the less likely they were to know either the extent or the cause of the problems that staff were facing. However, some also commented on the unusual situation, with managers necessarily being as inexperienced as everyone else in the new system and new scheme.

The staff we spoke to felt that they had a particular problem being heard. They variously commented about how much better things would be if the management
listened, or came to see for themselves the daily issues. We were told that an HEO who had joined two months previously had never even introduced herself to her team:

‘The managing of people starts with understanding what your people do. If you don’t know what your people are doing how are you going to manage them properly?’

(Focus group participant)

Even when staff were in a position to talk to someone who might listen they felt stifled by concerns from above over what they might say. In one office we were told that staff were coached before talking to senior visitors, and were expected to fill in questionnaires so that their comments could be screened. Staff from other offices in the same Business Unit told us that they did not have anything so formal but were aware that they would get ‘dragged into the office’ if their comments were considered inappropriate.

In one Business Unit we were told that they imagined that Doug Smith must think everything was fine, because all the managers from HEO upwards were putting on a positive front. As one described it, above a certain level they were ‘painting the roses red’. In another Business Unit, staff were left feeling that the message being sent to senior managers was that they were incompetent, after they were apparently e-mailed by the CEO who told them it was their fault that things weren’t working properly.

Although the majority of respondents did not feel they were being heard, in one Business Unit the area director was praised for being approachable, and ready to listen and take notes of any concerns staff had. Whilst only some felt this senior figure would action their suggestions, the open door approach was clearly appreciated, and may indicate practice which could be followed elsewhere.

8.2.2 EO and HEO responses

EOs were seen by staff as the middlemen between them and the hard edged management above. In turn most EOs talked about how they felt they were meant to support and nurture their staff, but also about their need for more hands-on management from above. One EO spoke about looking out for people who needed a break, and another about how hard it was to support staff when they knew so little of what they had to do each day. It was unusual for EOs to be negative about their staff, and only one had a hard headed attitude towards their Administrative Officers (AOs), commenting that staff whinged ‘regardless of what they are doing and when they are doing it’.

HEOs were rather more distant from the AOs, and whilst they were not disparaging, only one explicitly noted their role in supporting staff, and admitted that they could have done more to keep their hopes about the new system more realistic.
One EO felt that the people in senior management were too reactive, trying to address issues that had got out of hand rather than keeping on top of any problems at an early stage. They also noted that there had been a turnover of higher grades and felt that the current management was not in the best interest of the clients:

‘I think they’ve been badly let down and it’s being led by donkeys at the moment, because we’ve lost some good people.’

(EO/HEO)

HEOs were more likely to think that senior managers knew and understood the burning issues well, and one was particularly pleased with the new area manager mentioned above.

8.3 Target setting

The CSA uses various targets to manage performance and improve productivity. Discussion around target setting allowed participants to talk about the areas that were most valuable to them or most concerned them rather than a comprehensive list of targets used in their Business Unit. It is natural that most of those discussed will be low level, daily targets, since these are more likely to be in the minds of participants. They are also of relevance since they illustrate how the pressures of reaching certain goals can affect the work done on a daily basis.

It was noticeable that whilst some thought the changes had brought more targets others felt that it was less target driven than previously.

8.3.1 AO targets

Many of the AOs complained that the targets they had been set were unrealistic. The problems with the new computer system were really slowing them down, and time spent on phone calls kept them away from other tasks. However, some appreciated that targets were an important management tool; they were not universally against the idea in principle, providing the goals were achievable.

Distorted behaviour

It is well known that targets can act as an incentive to change behaviour and improve productivity, but that they can also change behaviour in unwanted ways, or have unanticipated outcomes. The staff we spoke to commented on various ways in which they were hitting targets under the new regulations despite achieving very little.

When a job requires the satisfactory completion of more than one type of task it is important that this is properly reflected in the structure of the reward system. We were told that staff were frequently doing easier tasks like changing addresses or updating phone numbers in order to hit their target for number of tasks completed. In one Business Unit we were told that managers were actively searching out easy tasks for staff who would not otherwise hit their target for the week. In another they
had discovered that if a case was delayed because of migration they got the option to send out a letter to the Non-resident Parent (NRP). This was completely unnecessary but got them the desired ‘tick’ towards their targets, and apparently thereby pleased their HEO.

It could be argued that whilst this behaviour is below expectations, it is still fair if everyone has the opportunity to clear easier tasks in order to reach their targets. Unfortunately this was not possible for everyone we spoke to; some staff claimed not to know which were the most straightforward tasks and others were on teams that did not have access to all types of work. Indeed some staff we spoke to commented that they weren’t getting sent the right kind of work to hit their targets under any circumstance; some thought this was because it went to new client teams. They were, nonetheless, very busy and were under the distinct impression that they were very low down in some unspoken pecking order, which resulted in them both missing their targets and feeling they were doing most of the hard work.

When targets are competitive or related to monetary reward there will always be those who look for any potential for cheating. Unfortunately we were told that some members of staff in one Business Unit had been told to make up National Insurance numbers to enter on their stats sheet, by an HEO more interested in hitting their target than actually getting the work done.

Another Business Unit told us that they had been told to stockpile claims from Jobcentre Plus because they are easy to process and would look good on their stats when the new system went live. In theory this would have incidentally benefited the Parent with Care (PWC) who stood to gain up to £10 a week by being brought onto the new rules. However, the ploy went badly wrong and resulted in the work not being done at all. Those cases had been stockpiled since 2002 and we were told they had still not been put on the system.

A member of a complaints team gave us an example of doing unnecessary work in order to hit targets. Complaints teams have to send out responses to their clients. Sometimes they have nothing to say, and have not achieved any resolution. We were told that in this instance they will send out an interim response, so that they can clear the target date for response from the computer, and hit their target for quick responses:

‘It makes management look good because their stats are increasing. It makes our team look good which is probably a good thing, but at the same time it builds up the work and then obviously the stress level for myself’.

(Focus group participant)

Free-riding is a potential problem with team based targets, where certain individuals are able to gain from team effort despite adding little or no input themselves. It seems that this was particularly acute across the CSA when we visited, due to the apparently high levels of absenteeism. Some team members told us their teams were down to just a third of their full size because of absences due to sickness or
stress and they were still expected to reach the same levels of output, thus forcing team members to work harder on behalf of absent colleagues. Not surprisingly, the remaining team members felt resentful, disillusioned and overworked.

The need for accurate monitoring can also cause problems in target oriented organisations. It is impossible to reward people if there is no record kept of their progress. But regular feedback can also change work priorities and behaviour, for example by telling employees they are on target to win a reward. We found that some Business Units have teams of people who do nothing else but watch the performance statistics. Staff are told mid-week which targets they are on track for hitting and which they stand no chance of making. Not surprisingly they then focus all their attention on the work that will help them reach their target.

**Opting in, or opting out**

Some of the incentive schemes introduced had not been well received by staff. One told us that they were refusing to work towards any targets because an understaffed team meant that there was no hope of hitting them. Some noted that their HEO thought their targets were unrealistic and was getting them to record everything they did in a day, as evidence of how long things were taking, and what they were doing.

In another Business Unit, staff commented that their managers had also told them to ignore the targets as they were unrealistic. They were uncomfortable doing this because they felt they needed to earn their special bonuses. The whole situation was particularly frustrating to these members of staff since data warehouse was not working so they had to record their statistics in triplicate for their EO.

We heard that a new, team based bonus scheme has been introduced across all the Business Units. There was some discussion about the type of teams who were receiving this bonus, and we believe that it rotates, so different teams are eligible each time. However, it was apparent that in most Business Units people were opting out of the system, despite the potential for monetary reward – apparently because they did not approve of the idea that it was not universally available.

**Changes**

It was a year into the new scheme when we spoke to staff and some changes were being introduced to the targets and incentives. These included the ‘balanced scorecard’ approach to targets, and a rather controversial performance related pay (PRP) scheme. The new PRP scheme was to have fixed proportions of staff ranked into different performance categories, by virtue of their relative performance.

We were told that the balanced scorecard approach was being introduced to stop people using easy tasks to increase their stats. The balance was between type of work and customer service, and aims to ensure that staff focus on everything that is important.
Performance related pay was not well received among the people we spoke to. They were concerned about the cumulative nature of the measure. They told us about the potential for a bad week to snowball and result in them falling into the ‘wrong box’. We heard that the design of the performance related pay led to completely random allocations of rewards; two people could achieve exactly the same results but only one might receive the pay because of the use of quantile distributions to allocate the funds.

It was noted that in one Business Unit, staff were under the impression that the system for checking productivity was changing. They said that there was more emphasis on evidence, but that this was still very much based on the quantity and not necessarily the quality of work done.

**Consequences of missing targets**

Where staff talked to us about the consequences of not meeting targets they mentioned two main punishments. The first was to be called to the manager’s office to explain the shortfall (the explanation had to be in writing in some offices), and the second was to miss out on the reward. Sometimes the manager’s opinion could influence their likelihood of getting a reward, whilst for other targets the reward depended purely on the number of completed tasks. In one Business Unit, the staff talked about the potential for getting a reduced ‘box rating’ which would prevent them from getting a pay rise and could ultimately end up with them being sacked.

**Makinson Awards**

Across England, but not Northern Ireland, there are very large team bonuses known as Makinson awards. We did not discuss these with staff in detail, but did discover that the results of the Eastern Business Unit staff in Northern Ireland were fed into the calculation for the Makinson Target, even though they themselves were not entitled to any bonus.

**8.3.2 Use of targets by EOs and HEOs**

Managers generally believed there was a potential benefit from target setting. They noted that targets helped to make staff strive to achieve. They were all encouraged from above to keep a close eye on targets; indeed one told us that they had daily discussions about the drive for better performance and another claimed that whole teams were spending an hour a day just discussing targets. Some also spoke about how measuring performance enabled them to challenge behaviour, although others were concerned about the high levels of stress that staff were under, and would have preferred a more relaxed approach to target setting during implementation of the new regulations.

One manager spelled out to us the range of targets faced by staff. Managing these targets was described as trying to keep several plates spinning. Not only were there individual and team targets but local targets, Makinson targets and Secretary of
State targets, and each one resulted in someone pushing the managers to get their teams to perform. This respondent estimated that there were around eight sets of targets to hit at various times.

The managers we spoke to were frustrated by the problems they had faced with the data warehouse software. This resulted in the need for clerical performance records. One felt that the reason data warehouse wasn’t performing properly was that the staff were not using CS2 properly. Another commented that even when it worked it was only available on a specific machine and so wasn’t very convenient to access. This manager was frustrated with the need for clerical records but relieved that they were at least enabling performance measurement.

Managers talked about the benefits of the balanced scorecard approach, but one HEO commented that the reason this hadn’t been tried before was that the system was new and therefore the tasks were all relating to first calculation. Interestingly the EO that we interviewed from this Business Unit pointed out that the staff were working to a recipe card; target cases, then priority cases, complaints cases and telephone calls. It was not clear whether this approach was separate from targets setting or part of it. Another HEO felt that it was wrong for the CEO to pay special attention to, say, productivity or CS2 problems at the same time as trying to introduce the balanced score card. This person felt that there was a move towards aggressive attitudes and knee jerk management styles which were sending mixed messages.

It was apparent that these managers knew that staff were finding ways around the performance measures. One told us that staff were focusing their attention on cases that were clearly going to be closed, and would not result in any money being paid, because they were easier. This manager had concerns about introducing targets too soon with a new system despite being a keen proponent of performance management in general. In another Business Unit, a manager told us that staff had realised that they could hit the team telephony target by just putting one person on the phone all week.

Helpline staff are still working on both systems, sometimes simultaneously. One helpline manager told us that they had noticed that because old rules cases came straight through to them they could effectively manage their time on these calls. Conversely, calls relating to new rules cases were routed around the Business Unit, making it difficult for the helpline staff to control the length of time the callers spent on the phone, or the rate with which they hung up. As a result helpline staff were focusing all their attention and resources on the old rules queue to enable them to hit the target, and under-staffing the new rules helpline.

Naturally managers had their own opinions on how to best incentivise their staff. They were frustrated by the pressure put on them from above. One told us that even if they questioned the validity of a measure they were told that it didn’t matter it still had to be achieved. One manager felt that it was too much to measure daily performance. This person felt that weekly measures were more appropriate, making
allowances for off days, and putting the emphasis on long-term performance not short-term gains. Another commented that more appropriate targets would measure the amount of money going out to families, not the number of tasks completed, nor the number of calculations made.

8.4 Calculation and compliance

Staff and managers were all aware of the difficulty assessing claims and getting compliance on the old rules. They knew that simplification was a large part of the reforms and was expected to ensure that cases could go through the calculation process in just six weeks.

In most focus groups someone claimed to have completed a child support calculation in less than a week, or even within a day. It was clear that when there were no snags it was possible to make cases progress and reach a final calculation much more quickly than would have been possible before. Double benefits cases were highlighted as particularly easy to complete.

Despite the good news about the relative speed of the calculation under the new rules, it has not been easy to get a significant quantity of calculations completed this quickly. One respondent told us that they were expected to calculate between ten and 20 cases a week, but had only managed two since January. An EO told us that their team were achieving lower compliance than they had under the old rules. In one focus group, participants estimated that just ten per cent of cases would go through the system without difficulty, although they also claimed that a minimal number were becoming totally stuck – suggesting that some of the workarounds were working. However their compliance rates had dropped from 80 per cent to 40 per cent. These AOs told us how frustrated they had been to hear that the Sapphire team could progress cases clerically four times faster than they could on CS2.

Other conversations with AOs indicated that compliance had gone down, and debt work was taking much longer than it did under the old rules. In one focus group we were told that deduction of earnings orders (DEO) had to go out clerically and were therefore taking up to four hours each. The EO that we spoke to from this Business Unit was pleased that one member of staff was completing six DEOs a week as this was a big improvement on December’s figures. We heard that most staff did not feel able to spend that length of time on DEOs and so were opting not to send them; management apparently supported them in their decision and had applied for more staff to be sent to help out.

As mentioned before, some managers were under the impression that efficiency was low because the staff did not understand the system, and were therefore making errors that meant cases couldn’t progress. One was prepared to forgo short-term performance if their staff would train and consolidate thoroughly in all areas of their work (i.e. end-to-end) because they wanted to see a turnaround within five years and see a properly functioning office.
For PWCs on benefits the new rules should offer a welcome addition to their income of up to £10 a week. This is an important part of the reform, intended to help the poorest families. We were told by one HEO that they believe that many PWCs on benefits do not realise they are entitled to this premium:

‘There certainly are issues around the functionality on the system for child maintenance premiums... I don’t think they’re really aware that they should be getting £10 and they’re not, because we’re not getting a lot of people complaining saying I should be getting my £10 where is it?’

(EO/HEO)

8.5 Migration of old rules cases on to new rules

As mentioned in previous sections, the vast majority of staff felt the new rules were an improvement, and in particular they appreciated the simplification and potential to speed things up. However, most CSA clients still have old rules cases, and there has been no date set for bulk migration of cases on to the new rules. Indeed any claim made before 3 March 2003 should still be processed using the old rules. The conversion of all these cases will fundamentally alter the CSA, and it was worrying staff and managers alike that they would not be able to cope with the ensuing problems.

As we understand it, the majority of staff are still employed to process old rules cases, although one EO told us that there are very few cases that have not reactively migrated in their business unit and that most staff are now on new rules teams. At the other extreme were told that there is still a massive backlog of old rules cases in one Business Unit, and managers are considering sending the work out to other areas, because they can’t handle the extra work, and can’t take on more staff.

We wanted to hear opinions about moving cases over to the new rules. Staff and managers spoke about their experiences with cases that had forcibly migrated and gave us their opinions about the mass migration of all old rules cases. We found to our surprise that in one Business Unit test cases had been migrating over since 2002, and that the staff were firmly of the opinion that unlinked cases were being migrated. In another Business Unit staff felt that cases migrated for spurious reasons.

The majority of staff were concerned about the prospect of mass migration of cases from the old rules to the new rules. In one focus group they talked about a resultant mass walk out, and early retirement. Only one person in this group felt that the migration could work, and then only providing the cases were ‘clean’. It was noted by some that they were not getting any training on migration and were being encouraged to forget everything they knew about the old system, which was not helpful when they had to deal with these kinds of cases.

Staff told us that they had problems with closed cases migrating over. It appears that
cases are held on the system forever, and that the migration process causes them to re-open. This has the potential to bring the whole system to a grinding halt if all cases are to be moved. One Business Unit had attempted to solve this by cleaning up old cases, and entering closure codes in the hope that this would stop premature migration.

The managers we spoke to were also very worried about mass migration. They were aware of a number of problems when cases moved over as a result of links with new rules cases, including jumbled records, cases getting suspended, confusion with payments, and changes to identification codes. Furthermore, one had been told that prior to mass migration all suspended cases would be reactivated. It was clear that these managers did not feel that the new system was ready for the enormous number of cases waiting to move over.

Staff were also concerned by the migration of cases that had been held up for several years. They were already facing the forced migration of cases that were three years old and had never been assessed. In one Business Unit they were just starting to deal with linked cases that had been stockpiled because management wanted to put them on hold in 2000 when they were uncertain about the changes to the system. Not surprisingly these cases caused all kinds of problems:

‘October 2000 they came in and two thousand cases had been left there and have just been brought out now and they’re being passed and every single one of them is linked and every single one of them is wrapped in migration and it’s picking up all kinds of people who’ve left, people who’ve got new children.’

(EO/HEO)

Financial arrangements were being affected by the migration of cases. We were told that all direct debit arrangements were affected by the migration of cases because of the change from using reference numbers to National Insurance numbers. Some people noted that cases were also being migrated with outstanding debt. Sometimes this debt turned out to be unpaid fees. Fees are not charged under the new rules, and this was causing problems for staff, who believed they should have been written off before migration.

In some areas, transitional teams have been created to handle the migration of cases. It is their responsibility to clean cases before they are moved. Staff were largely unimpressed by their work, claiming that transitional teams had been set such difficult targets that they were suggesting that cases were ready for migration when they had enormous amounts of outstanding work. Their targets were also considered to be the reason that nobody had listened to them earlier when they had claimed that the number of cases needing to be migrated was much higher than management were anticipating. Even focus group participants and managers who had worked on transitional teams claimed that transition does not work. One manager had been
trying to tell this to their superiors but felt nobody was listening, and was getting increasingly concerned that someone would turn around and ask what the transitional teams had been doing. In addition to the self-confessed poor performance of the transitional team, we were told that throughout the time that a case is in transition there is absolutely no access to that case, other staff cannot access or update any information. They described this as a black hole:

‘TCT [transitional cases team] have got their certain not targets, legends yes, they are a legend I have decided. And they work only to that legend and if all that is ticked then this case will migrate but it can be in the most appalling state with outstanding work. And also there has been a black hole in between, it being prepared for migration and migrating and in that period you have absolutely no record of anything, and that period can be months.’

(Focus group participant)

It seems that there is much that can be done to improve customer service when a case is migrated. We were told by staff that they were not allowed to send out letters telling clients that their case was being migrated. Old rules cases and new rules cases have different helpline numbers, and different information areas on the CSA website. Consequently clients with queries who were not aware that the case had transferred were telephoning the old rules number, being put on hold for some time, then told that they were no longer an old rules client and would need to call the new number. It is particularly strange that this could be allowed to happen when migration must result in altered financial circumstances for almost every client involved. It should also be noted that staff believe that a lot of claimants are not aware that their case is linked to others and are therefore understandably surprised and frustrated when their new claim is held up by the migration process.

8.6 Solutions and Best Practice

Some innovative members of staff had attempted to find alternative solutions to the problems caused by the fragile IT system, to provide better customer service. As noted in earlier sections, staff were not always entirely sure how near they were to breaking rules or whether they may be causing problems further into the process, but their intentions were generally honourable. Some managers had also found creative solutions to improve morale and team work, and support their staff, such as encouraging quality hours or simply keeping a sense of humour.

We were told by one focus group that they were trying to convince parents to arrange voluntary payments if the system prevented them from completing the calculation. If the NRP did not pay from the initial date of the claim, they would potentially be liable for large arrears, and leave the PWC without an important income. Staff were also reminding parents to keep careful records of payments and receipts, so that these could be offset from any calculation in the future. In another
Business Unit, staff had gone one step further and set up a voluntary payment system where they recorded all money changing hands so that there was no room for argument once the calculation was completed. It should be noted that support for voluntary payments was not universal among staff or clients, and we were told that the Belfast office was advising NRPs not to make any voluntary payments. Despite this, in general most staff felt that a voluntary arrangement made things easier:

‘...however long it takes us to assess that case that parent has financial responsibilities now. Yes, I do feel that if we had more NRP’s paying voluntary payments to the parents we would not have problems.’

(Focus group participant)

‘We are encouraging them to make VP’s [voluntary payments] at first point of contact, which we have never done before.’

(Focus group participant)

In addition to arranging (hopefully short-term) voluntary payments until the calculation had gone through, we were told that in one Business Unit the staff had been encouraging all NRPs to pay direct once the assessment had been made. This was partly because payments were going into the system but getting stuck for some reason, leaving both the NRP and the PWC out of pocket. In this Business Unit, staff were even arranging direct payment for benefits cases and were confident that this was the right thing to do. They pointed out that the system allowed them to make adjustments to take direct payments into account:

‘…on the system you can manually adjust the debt by whatever you’ve been paying weekly.’

(Focus group participant)

An e-mail had been received in one Business Unit suggesting ideas for ‘queue cleansing’. This identified ways of tackling workflow queues, and the staff we spoke to felt that it had improved turn around. It focused on clearing short, five minute tasks, and making sure that at least one finance related task was done each day. The order with which other tasks should be approached was also described. The staff noted that they had since seen ways in which they could improve on the original suggestions to make them less complicated.

In some areas the trainers have been sitting with staff, watching them struggle with the computer system. Staff felt that this had been an eye opener for some of the trainers. It has enabled them to be much more realistic in their presentation of CS2, and has taught them to double check that it actually works in the way they say it will.

One Business Unit had attempted to overcome the problem of data corruption from Jobcentre Plus. They had introduced a team of pre-assessment officers to work on the Interface data, and check the information provided with the Jobcentre staff:
‘That should stop now the – pre-MAF team has been introduced because the Jobcentres come to us, that’s what they do, they come to us and say look, these are the people.’

(Focus group participant)

We heard about the concept of quality hours from staff in one Business Unit. This seemed like a particularly positive move. Staff told us that these hours were used to deal with specific areas that needed addressing. One that caught our attention was a quality hour to address the tension between helpline staff and others. The quality hour brought together the different teams and they were able to describe their jobs, talk about why they do what they do, and discuss their frustrations. It was felt that this went a long way towards removing any resentment, and increasing mutual understanding. Quality hours were also being used to allow staff with specific knowledge to train others.

The staff we talked to liked to feel supported at work by someone they respected and they wanted to have ready access to someone who could solve their general problems. Consolidators got widespread praise, although floor walkers were widely scorned – the division was very clear:

‘...they [consolidators] are absolute stars’.

(Focus group participant)

‘We need more of them like now we need to take experienced staff and make them consolidators to her us, yes they are brilliant.’

(Focus group participant)

Generally speaking, any supportive colleague was much appreciated whether given an official role or not, in fact in one Business Unit, colleagues were the only positive aspect of the workplace mentioned.
9 Benefits and limitations

Key messages

Simplification of the calculation used to make maintenance calculations had brought considerable benefits, and the reduced emphasis on information gathering was welcomed.

However, problems with the computer and IT systems had reduced the ability of staff to deliver any resulting benefits. The change away from a caseworker approach (it was perceived) had reduced levels of satisfaction for some staff. Some staff also thought that reform could go further (e.g. no phasing).

Managers tended to share the broad thrust of these views – a satisfaction that the underlying scheme had been made more transparent and workable, tempered by some concerns about detail and frustration at the failure of IT to enable the new scheme to be adequately delivered.

9.1 Introduction

A year had passed since the introduction of the child support reforms when we visited the Business Units. We discussed the benefits and limitations of the reforms, and found that despite the overwhelming sense of frustration with the system, some things had changed for the better.

9.2 AO responses

9.2.1 Benefits

Staff talked to us enthusiastically about the simplification of the rules, and the benefits these had brought to both staff and clients. This was the single most frequently mentioned reason for reform, and it is clear that the benefits have been noted. The potential rapid speed of the new process was appreciated and the smaller amount of information gathering was also preferable.
In every focus group we were told that the new rules are better for the client, quicker, easier to understand and fairer. Increased transparency was also considered to be a large benefit of the changes.

The promised advent of a paperless office was still some way off, but staff were pleased with the reduction in filing. One noted they now had small plastic wallets rather than large files cluttering their desks.

It was mentioned by several people that the reforms had had an unexpected (to them) effect on Parents with Care (PWCs) on benefits. One felt that these PWCs were more likely to give the Non-resident Parents (NRPs) details now that they stood to gain from the process, and another was pleasantly surprised by the levels of honesty, with some PWCs telling them how much they were receiving in hand from their ex-partners and others calling to check why they were £10 better off each week. If this is widespread it is likely that the premium will act to support compliance by PWCs but, as discussed below, there was an alternative, less positive view of the level of incentive created by the Child Maintenance Premium.

Some staff thought that the change in the number of nights needed to qualify for overnight stay reductions was a positive move, encouraging NRPs to remain in contact. It was noted that the calculation for overnight stays is now easier, and it is generally accepted by parents, although staff acknowledged that inevitably some children were still being used as pawns. A few members of staff still thought there was room for improvement in this area, for example one was concerned for NRPs who often had their children around for meals but not overnight stays.

We were told that the default maintenance decision is working well, and that it encourages NRPs to give them the full information if child support will be calculated at a lower rate. One felt that this was useful even for getting money from the self-employed.

### 9.2.2 Limitations

Staff generally mentioned limitations that were related to the computers rather than the regulations. A few commented that inevitably some clients would be worse off under the new rules, but this did not present a major problem to anyone we spoke to.

Many of the regulation points that disappointed staff were those that were perceived to lack fairness. Migration was concerning some members of staff, because they felt that it was unfair to migrate (convert) some cases across whilst others remained on the old system, under the old rules. They did not like this fairly random approach (as they saw it) to change.

Staff made a number of comments about the detail of the maintenance calculations. However, these should be read in the light of strong support for the simplified and more transparent calculation – they are points of detail within an overall structure that staff thought was beneficial.
Some staff commented that it was unfair to take into account stepchildren in the home of a working NRP, but not if the NRP was on benefits. They felt that minimum income NRPs were treated unfairly because they had no allowance for shared care, whilst an NRP on benefits was exempt from paying if they shared any care. Several thought it was wrong in all cases to put the stepchildren in the NRPs household before their own children, particularly when these children were receiving money from their own absent parent. Furthermore it was pointed out by one that monetary penalties that took money from the NRP, left a lesser amount available to the PWC, in effect punishing one for the other’s lack of compliance.

Some felt that the reforms hadn’t gone far enough to force behaviour to change. For example, the £10 premium for PWCs on benefits acts as a partial incentive for PWCs to be compliant, but the PWC may be receiving considerably more than that without declaring it. If the PWC is receiving cash in hand from their ex-partner and does not declare it, the NRP could end up paying twice because the claim will be backdated. A similar problem was apparent with the shared care element of the reforms; whilst it could be seen as an encouragement for NRPs to stay in contact, some PWCs may attempt to prevent access because they do not want to lose one day’s child support. At present, each extra night with the NRP reduces by around 14 percent the possible maintenance payment to the PWC.

Some staff were very frustrated with the introduction of phasing and felt that this was an unnecessary complication. Nobody spoke in favour of it. They commented that past clients had managed when recalculation resulted in payments going up or down. There was also some annoyance about the level of information about bank accounts being requested from NRPs who wanted to pay by standing order, and the problems with late and early payments, all of which were likely to ‘rattle the cages’ of the compliant NRPs.

Some longer serving staff missed case ownership. They felt that they had previously been allowed more autonomy than they were with the new end-to-end working and that they had been better able to manage their workload.

9.3 EO and HEO Responses

9.3.1 Benefits

Most managers praised the simplification of the rules, and the credibility of the new system. There was cautious satisfaction that sometimes it was possible to complete a calculation in a day. One HEO pointed out that the new regulations made the child support system more like the tax system, in that neither are expected to take into account expenditure such as housing costs.

The simplification had made it easier to talk to clients about calculations, levels of payment and the rules regarding overnight stays. It was pointed out that staff could calculate the likely payment and suggest to the NRP that they consider voluntary payments or saving that amount so that there were no surprises when the arrears
were calculated. One positive HEO even felt that it was now easier to handle linked cases, although they admitted that migration was still complicating matters.

There was a general feeling among EOs and HEOs that the new rules on shared care were fairer, and easier to apply. One EO told us that they felt that they were intended to encourage contact, and it was therefore beneficial that they do not penalise the NRP for spending just one night a week with the children. One pointed out that there has been no change to the problems with getting ex-couples to agree about the number of days they care for the children.

Several managers felt that it was a benefit to be able to get information from the Inland Revenue, and one manager commented that the ability to get money and information from employers was also a great improvement for speeding up cases. Another claimed that the current policy on sharing information was in line with what clients had always assumed was possible.

One manager felt that the minimum payment for NRPs on benefits was a positive move, kick starting responsibility and the relationship with the Child Support Agency (CSA). They felt that it taught them to accept that they had to pay, and encouraged the PWC to allow continuing access. It was also considered by some that the child maintenance premium was an advantage, increasing the compliance of the PWC and proving that the focus of the CSA was the reduction of child poverty rather than filling the treasury’s coffers.

In addition to the rule changes, the staff have been expected to work end-to-end. Two of the managers we spoke to thought that this had brought improvements. One claimed that it was better for the clients, because they were passed from pillar to post less, and the other felt that it was better for staff who gained satisfaction from following a case through. It is noteworthy that none of the staff offered the suggestion that end-to-end working increased their job satisfaction.

9.3.2 Limitations

Managers, like staff, were more frustrated with computer problems than by any aspect of the regulations. However there were a few areas that they felt could be improved. Like their staff, they commented that phasing was unnecessary, and also felt that the variations scheme was a hangover from the previous scheme rather than a useful component of the new regulations. One also believed that more could be done to inform potential clients of their rights, such as raising awareness of the Child Maintenance Premium.

Just two of the managers commented that they were a little concerned that simplification had resulted in a lack of fairness. One disliked the fact that mortgages were no longer taken into account, since they varied so much around the country. Another welcomed simplification from a performance perspective but felt that they had lost the ability to take into account the full set of circumstances of an individual.
As mentioned above, deductions from NRP benefits were seen as a positive step in making them aware of their responsibilities. It is unfortunate then that we were told that staff have found it difficult to work out how to apply deductions in these cases. We also found that there was no benefit from the increased penalties brought in with the reform as they were not being used because of the lack of confidence in the system.

There were some limitations noted that were related more to training and management than regulations. One EO felt that staff needed to be more aware of the laws surrounding the work they were doing. For example, very few knew what to do if the NRP was a minor. Others pointed out the ongoing problems with trying to encourage end-to-end working and the lack of enthusiasm for using the phone.

It was interesting that one manager mentioned that with lower calculations being expected there was also the opportunity to make the claim that the Agency was owed less in arrears. Ultimately this person felt this was a limitation since the CSA should be helping to eradicating child poverty rather than focusing on providing positive statistics.
Part 2 – Research with CSA clients

This part of the report explores the experiences of new clients of the Child Support Agency (CSA). It considers the level of understanding of the new scheme, feelings about the application process and the impact of the child support calculation. It also reports on improvements suggested by new CSA clients to make the scheme operate more effectively.
10 Characteristics of participants

Key messages

Contact issues are clearly complex and ongoing once parents separate. Many parents faced difficulties maintaining contact, and in some cases were unable to gain access to their children at all.

Financial arrangements made through courts or voluntarily upon separation generally included some support for the child(ren). Typically the Parent with Care (PWC) turned to the CSA for help when these payments stopped being regular, or failed to meet the needs of the family. However, sometimes the involvement of the CSA resulted in smaller payments being made to the PWC, particularly when the Non-resident Parent (NRP) was on a low income or in receipt of benefits.

A few NRPs appeared to believe that children only needed things that made them feel good. These parents seemed to have no interest in the wider costs of bringing up children such as providing them with accommodation and food, and preferred to focus on material goods. In the context of child support reforms it may be useful to consider ways of addressing this viewpoint, in order to make clear to parents the range of needs of a child, and the probable cost of meeting those needs.

It is clear from speaking to clients that the CSA is not the first port of call when separated couples make financial arrangements. Clients often turn to the Agency when voluntary arrangements fail to meet their needs. This is an important finding, in that it indicates that there may already be a history of problems trying to obtain regular payments from the NRP. Indeed PWCs may be best placed to advise on suitable strategies to ensure early and continuing compliance in relation to their own ex-partner. Furthermore, the fact that many of these parents have tried other ways of organising their finances suggests that setting up voluntary payments through the Agency may not provide a long-term solution.
Characteristics of participants

It is interesting to consider the financial arrangements made on separation in the context of the potential for changing levels of contact with the child. It appears from the clients we interviewed that the short-term decision to become the PWC or NRP can have long-term financial consequences. If the parents switch parenting roles after sharing out equity and belongings, one parent may be left with very little financial backing and the added pressure of a young family to bring up. In at least one case, this type of situation was made worse by the reluctance of the initial PWC to hand over the child’s belongings – forcing the other parent to find the money to buy replacements. It is especially important given these findings that the problems with the CSA computer system (CS2) discussed in Part 1 relating to role reversals are addressed in order to prevent hardship for these families.

10.1 Introduction

Interviewees were drawn from a sample of 600 CSA clients living in one of 36 postcode areas within three Business Units. Of the first 50,000 new rules cases, there were considerably more PWCs on benefits than private clients (those PWCs who do not claim benefits but opt in to the service). However, for the purpose of this research we spoke to roughly equal numbers of PWCs on benefits and working PWCs, because the vast majority of benefits recipients knew very little about the process and reported having had little contact with the CSA. We also interviewed approximately equal numbers of working and non-working (NRPs) for similar reasons.

10.2 Demographic characteristics

The age of interviewees ranged from 20 to 58 with an average NRP age of 41 years and average PWC age of 33 years. Our sample included people of various minority ethnic origins, and some whose mother tongue was not English.

Despite being recent child support claimants, the participants of this research had been separated from the relevant partner for an average of slightly over three years; this ranged from 14 years to none – indeed some were still living together. There were also a minority of clients who had never lived as a family unit with the NRP. Whilst we did not explicitly ask about the reasons for separation, we heard that a number of ex-partners had been violent or abusive. A small number of interviewees had required police protection or the support of sheltered accommodation when their relationship ended, and a similar number told us that they had been formally accused of abuse by their ex-partners. Some participants or their ex-partners were subject to restraining orders. Others blamed the breakdown of their relationship on infidelity or financial difficulties, whilst some felt they had simply grown apart.

For further information see Appendix B which looks at the methodology around interviewing clients.
We did not explore the reasons why relationships had broken down, except to ascertain the degree of hostility between partners as this might affect perceptions of the CSA. In a few cases the ex-partners were on good terms. Some had never, in fact, lived together and there seemed to be a lack of emotional contact – either positive or negative – between these partners. Some of those we interviewed had apparently never separated, living together or had reconciled and not surprisingly these partners were unlikely to seem hostile to one another. Yet among the whole sample, it was common for there to be an appetite for continued bitterness between ex-partners that seemed to be almost without limit.

The clients interviewed had between one and five qualifying children, aged between eight months and 16 years old. A number had older children as well who were no longer eligible for support, and some had younger children and/or stepchildren with new partners. Five interviewees were involved in multiple applications and several were living with new partners who were themselves CSA clients, thus being part of a chain of linked cases.

A few of the clients that we spoke to were both NRPs and PWCs, and some had equal shared care. We found that family structures were far from static – some of the clients had switched from being the NRP to the PWC, or vice versa, at some point – as a result of letting children make the decisions about whose house they wanted to be at, for example. Some family circumstances were complicated by the fact that neither the PWC nor the NRP had custody of all the children in their family. The mother and stepfather of one NRP (i.e. the grandmother) had custody of two young children – whilst the eldest, aged 18, lived alone. One PWC had just one of four children living at home, the other three being looked after by social services.

Several PWCs that we spoke to had ex-partners who were in prison; just one of these PWCs was maintaining contact through frequent prison visits with the child(ren). These NRPs were not liable for child support payments whilst in custody.

10.3 Contact between NRP and children

Prior to the child support reforms an NRP received a reduction in the assessed maintenance level if the children stayed overnight for at least two nights per week (or the equivalent averaged out across a year). The reforms halved the number of nights a child must spend with the NRP to receive a reduced calculation. There is a fine balance to be struck between offering an incentive to the NRP to maintain contact with their children, and providing the PWC with a financial reason to try and prevent such contact. The reduction in nights has the potential to reward more NRPs for maintaining contact with their offspring but it could still result in PWCs attempting to prevent overnight stays in order to be entitled to a higher level of maintenance.

We asked clients about the current arrangements for shared care or regular contact between the children and their NRP, and whether this had changed over time or as a result of contacting the CSA. We also talked about other types of contact,
including phone calls, but found that it was unusual for parents who did not see their children to stay in touch in other ways.

Among the clients we spoke to, shared care varied between children within families, between different families and for the same family across time. In some cases this was because of decisions made by the various parties and in other cases it was due to circumstances beyond their control. For example, some children did not want to stay with their NRP or wanted frequent but unplanned contact. Some PWCs did not want the children maintaining contact with the NRP, and some NRPs had severed ties themselves. A small number of NRPs who would have liked to see more of their children were suffering from illness or disability that they felt prevented them from providing adequate care, whilst others lived in unsuitable accommodation and were unable to offer overnight stays. Some children were no longer living near to the NRP and only had occasional visits, or went away together on holidays.

10.3.1 Regular contact
Of those children who were in regular contact with both parents, most were collected from, and returned to, the PWCs home. However, some PWCs refused to have any contact with the NRP, preferring to remain indoors whilst the children were collected, or let their new partner hand over the children. In some cases grandparents arranged the handovers, collecting and returning young children. Other ways of avoiding contact between the parents included collecting offspring from day-care or school one day and returning them there the following day. Only one NRP told us that they met the children without the PWC knowing in order to not ‘cause problems at home’. This NRP had teenage children, and kept in contact by mobile phone so that they could meet without the knowledge of the other parent.

10.3.2 Maintaining contact
Some NRPs tried very hard to maintain contact. One arranged for himself and his children to stay with a friend once a fortnight as he did not have his own home. Another had relocated to show the PWC how serious they were about continuing to be part of the children’s lives when they moved away. This NRP saw the children only once a fortnight because ‘I thought that’s what they [the CSA] suggested’, and so did not benefit from a reduced calculation for support. One NRP was only able to maintain any parental role with the help of their daughter, who kept in touch and offered information about her brother (who was very resentful about the break up and did not want contact).

Several NRPs had applied for regular contact through the courts. This was expensive and time consuming, and unfortunately several participants told us how ineffectual it had been. Even when they had been granted rights some found that the PWC did not abide by the decision. One commented that it was unlikely the courts would put a mother in prison for not abiding by the ruling. (None of the PWCs we spoke to admitted to breaching a court order to allow access.)
Some PWCs were allowing their children to have contact with the NRP despite alleging serious acts of violence. We were told that in one case the child had asked to stop the visits. In one case the PWC told us that their ex-partner had attacked them with a knife and another had been assaulted whilst pregnant. We did not discover why these parents felt able to retain sufficient trust to allow contact to continue under these circumstances.

10.3.3 Preventing contact

Other NRPs had been prevented from having unmonitored access to their children because of alleged acts of violence or other perceived risks such as kidnap. Some NRPs who were denied access admitted to us that they had retaliated with anger or aggression – making future contact even less likely. Some of these parents were able to meet up with their children in specialist centres (contact centres, perhaps), although those who did told us that the provision was inadequate, in terms of location, time allowed and the quality of the visit. The children were often bored and difficult to control in such unfamiliar surroundings, which only added to the feeling of being the ‘bad’ parent. Some NRPs were allowed no contact at all – including telephone conversations; one pointed out that this meant not even being allowed to cheer along their son at sporting events.

10.3.4 Shared care

A minority of the people we spoke to claimed to have the children fifty per cent of the time – fully shared care. Of these, one mother felt that she spent considerably more money on the children than their father, because she was responsible for paying for hobbies, clothes, trips and other day-to-day costs associated with school. Another parent with shared care commented that their older children came and went as they pleased. This parent thought that the children probably ate more meals with them, but fully respected the equal commitment of the other parent and did not look to alter the arrangement in any way. Only one parent with fully shared care seemed very unhappy with the arrangement. This parent, nominally a PWC, felt that the arrangement was unsettling; the primary school age child stayed with each parent for 2 nights, on a rotating 2 week schedule.

10.3.5 Severing ties

We were told by a small number of PWCs that their ex-partners had decided to cut all contact with their children. One PWC told us that the NRP had requested that the children did not contact them, except through a solicitor. Another PWC told us that the NRP had been the primary carer, and then wanted no contact at all. Several PWCs told us that even Christmas and birthday cards had stopped, and a few felt that the NRP was having ‘too much fun’ to worry about staying in contact with the children. None of the NRPs we spoke to indicated a desire to terminate contact, indeed several were passionate to the point of tears in their determination to be involved in the lives of their children.
10.4 Voluntary financial agreements

A number of clients had been to court to arrange their finances after separation. As a result, some NRPs were paying maintenance to their ex-partner in addition to child support, and several had paid substantial settlements in the hope that they would have no further obligations. It was noticeable that payments that had been made or received as part of the separation process were not always easily distinguishable from child maintenance in the minds of respondents.

In addition to a variety of maintenance payments, we found that some respondents had other financial responsibilities as a result of their separation. Several clients had been left with sole responsibility for debts that they had acquired whilst they were with their ex-partner, and they had no choice but to pay these off following the breakdown of their relationship. Of these debts, large credit card bills and car loans were by far the most common.

A small number of PWCs were receiving financial help from someone other than the NRP or a new partner. For example, one PWC had her mortgage paid off by her father, and another had older working children who were able to help with some financial shortfalls and bought occasional small items for their siblings.

10.4.1 Initial voluntary agreements

Some NRPs on low incomes had been making sizeable voluntary payments that were substantially reduced on becoming involved with the CSA. One NRP told us that seven years ago he was paying £25 a week from his benefits to support his ex-wife. Since the CSA has been involved he has paid nothing, although his circumstances are very complicated and he now lives in sheltered accommodation. (It appears that in most cases NRPs on benefits or low incomes who had been making voluntary payments that were in excess of the level calculated by the CSA subsequently stopped paying the extra amount.) At the other income extreme, another NRP had been paying frequent but irregular amounts of between £600 and £1,000 a month to his ex-partner, which included maintenance for both mother and children.

Working clients, and those who were previously married, were more likely to have solicitors advising them. Sometimes this advice was found to be poor. One PWC told us that when she first broke up from her ex-partner she was the NRP. She had given her ex-partner over 80 per cent of the value of their house on the advice of her solicitor. She also claimed to have paid him more than she earned for nine months, until she sacked her solicitor. Others told us that their divorce settlement had included handing over the majority of the equity in their home, with the intention of creating a ‘clean break’ settlement where no further support would be due. This may not have been poor advice at the time, but is largely incompatible with the new CSA rules (or perhaps ill-advised).

Prior to their involvement with the CSA, some clients had chosen to support their children by providing them with special items such as expensive toys. For example, one father typically spent around £700 on his child at Christmas, and considered this...
to be an acceptable form of child support. For these parents it seems that their interpretation of providing for their children was very much about making them happy through direct gifts from the father, rather than paying for basic provisions such as food and shelter through increasing the income of the mother.

10.4.2 Ongoing voluntary support

Some NRPs were continuing to buy their children items of clothing, toys or holidays, in addition to having a maintenance obligation through the CSA. Whilst some PWCs we spoke to welcomed this, others saw it as part of some control mechanism, or as a frustrating extravagance whilst they were struggling to make ends meet. One PWC told us she had received no maintenance in over two years, and even paid the NRP petrol money to visit the children, yet he was buying them expensive new clothes and toys whilst she struggled to feed them from her benefits. Others noted that the NRP only gave the children gifts in front of other people to ‘look good’, or show off. One NRP suggested that it was not uncommon for fathers on low incomes to shoplift in order to provide gifts for their children, such was the pressure to provide them with the things they wanted.
## 11 Understanding and awareness of the CSA

### Key messages

We did not find that the clients had particularly high expectations of the Child Support Agency (CSA) prior to contact with them, although there were variations. The impression clients had of the Agency was gained from friends and the media, and included much more information about the problems with the old scheme than about the reforms. During interviews with staff we heard that some clients had up-to-date information about the expected time to process a claim and higher expectations of the Agency than clients had in the past. Staff were concerned that they were unable to meet these expectations. The clients we spoke to did not appear to have had such high expectations, but there are several possible reasons for this. Most importantly, they were reporting their memory of their initial expectations after they had become CSA clients, and so were likely to have re-assessed their viewpoint. It is also likely that staff would be alert to changes in expectation and so likely to notice even a minority with such different views.

In the coming months the Agency may wish to think about its public image, and how best to present a realistic impression of the service it provides. It would appear that the overwhelming message broadcast by the media is that the Agency provides poor service, but there is a useful subtext that the CSA also has considerable power to make people pay. This could be built upon to portray an Agency that will not rest on its laurels in the face of difficulties in general or in addressing specific issues such as non-compliance.

There was a distinct lack of knowledge about the wide range of benefits and help available to single parents. This included a misunderstanding about the difference between Child Support (Maintenance) and Child Benefit. The confusion was compounded when parents claimed Income Support and Child Support at the same time. The lack of knowledge was similar among Parents with Care (PWCs) and Non-resident Parents (NRPs), but additionally many NRPs were not aware that PWCs in receipt of benefits became mandatory clients of...
the CSA. We feel that there could be more information provided to both parents about the interactions of the help available – which they have to claim and which are triggered as a result of other benefits. There may also be a need for documentation detailing the break down of any benefits received, so that clients fully understand where their money is coming from, and whether it will be affected by other income.

Our results indicate that both staff and clients need more information about the Child Maintenance Premium and the regulations surrounding PWCs who claim benefits. Currently it would appear that there are gaps in knowledge in these areas, which are hampering potential improvements in living standards for the poorest families.

11.1 Introduction

The CSA has undergone considerable change, and has redefined its core objectives. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) states on its website that the main objective of the CSA is to support departmental public service agreements. It suggests that it will do this by increasing the number of lone parents on benefits whose application leads to a calculation, by doubling the proportion of PWCs on benefits who receive maintenance by 2006, and by improving speed, accuracy, responsiveness and efficiency of the service provided. It indicates that these improvements will be delivered, in part, through the introduction of the new, more straightforward child support arrangements delivered as part of the Child Support Reforms5.

The key change brought about by the Child Support Reforms that will affect new clients is the simplified maintenance calculation. Other changes that clients may be aware of include the reduction in the number of overnight stays needed to qualify for a reduced calculation, and the introduction of the Child Maintenance Premium. Most NRPs will be assessed to pay a percentage of their net income as child maintenance (15 per cent for one child, 20 per cent for two, and 25 per cent for three or more) and will no longer need to provide a detailed breakdown of current financial commitments or information about their new partner’s income. NRPs on benefits will generally pay a flat rate of £5. This simplified calculation is intended to speed up the assessment process, thus enabling payments to start sooner in order to provide regular financial support for the children and prevent the build up of large arrears.

This part of the report pays particular attention to the extent to which new clients of the agency are aware of the current rules, and considers whether they had heard that there had been significant changes to the Agency just prior to their claim being initiated. It should be noted that clients approached to take part in this research were written to prior to being interviewed. The letter stated that ‘Your name has been

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selected at random from the records of people who have had assessments made by
the CSA since March 2003, under a new system.’ The letter did not explicitly tell
participants how the rules or the IT had changed and indeed none of those
interviewed mentioned the letter as a source of information about the changes.

11.2 Expectations of CSA, prior to contact

Expectations may affect a person’s decision to ask for help, their willingness to
comply with calculations made and their satisfaction with the service. It is possible
that poor knowledge and understanding could lead to low expectations which are
relatively easy to meet; resulting in higher levels of satisfaction, or that unrealistically
high expectations could create a sense of dissatisfaction among clients despite a
high level of service.

Not everyone had heard of the CSA prior to becoming a client. Those who hadn’t
had few, if any prior expectations. We found that parents who had recently arrived
in Britain were less likely to have formed expectations of the CSA, as were younger
parents. In addition, some clients had no expectations of the Agency because they
had been isolated from society by their ex-partners.

It was interesting that one client, who had moved to Britain from elsewhere in
Europe, had expected the CSA to be able to uphold child support decisions made in
another European Union country. This is not currently possible, but may become
more of an issue if movement across European countries becomes widespread.

The majority of people we spoke to had formed their expectations based on
fragmented information about the CSA gleaned from the media or friends. Very few
had any in-depth knowledge on which to base their expectations:

‘I didn’t know, and I think that’s what the [low] expectation was, I think it was
the lack of knowledge.’

(NRP, >45 years old)

Media coverage of the CSA has been extremely negative, over a long period of time.
Bad press coverage was frequently mentioned as a source of low expectations
among clients. The reports of fathers apparently committing suicide because of high
maintenance assessments were foremost in the minds of many parents. Some
clients, both NRPs and PWCs, told us they had been warned by friends to do
whatever they could to prevent the CSA getting involved. In most cases interviewees
were referring to press reports from some time ago, or knew of friends who had
been affected by the old scheme. It would appear that there are no positive images
of the CSA to counteract these reports:

‘People’s general opinion of the CSA is that it’s pretty rubbish’.

(PWC, <30 years old)

Because the press coverage tended to emphasise the high level of assessment, the
expectation of clients fell into two broad categories. On the one hand, there was a
general belief that clients would be treated badly and NRPs would be left with little money for themselves. On the other hand, the CSA was seen by some to be powerful and authoritative, thus able to extract money from those NRPs who were less willing to comply.

Whilst clients expressed a range of expectations of the CSA, there were clear differences in the responses of NRPs and those of PWCs and some differences between PWCs on benefits and private claimants. In general, the NRPs were concerned about the reports of being treated badly, whilst the PWC spoke of the authority of the Agency. However there were overlaps as discussed in more detail below.

### 11.2.1 Expectation of poor treatment

Among NRPs, the most common expectation was that the CSA would treat them badly, demanding money and forcing them to pay more than they could afford. Several NRPs told us that they were scared when the CSA contacted them. One assumed that the Agency would try and ‘hit me for six’, even though they did not have much disposable income and they ‘can’t get blood out of a stone’. A minority of NRPs had been involved with the CSA in the past and none remembered it as a positive experience; one recalled that members of staff then were ‘not nice people to deal with’. There was no discernable difference in the expectations of NRPs on benefits and those who were working.

It was also noticeable that some PWCs were aware that involving the Child Support Agency may aggravate the already poor relationship that they had with their ex-partner. They saw this as an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence:

‘Getting the CSA involved is seen as a negative and interfering thing to do, but I had to cut myself off emotionally – he wasn’t going to be any kind of father.’

(PWC, <30 years old)

### 11.2.2 Expectation of authority

Only two NRPs anticipated a benefit to being involved with the CSA, and both had expectations of the authority of the Agency. One NRP expected official recognition of paternity; the other expected some official record of payment.

PWCs who are not in receipt of benefits can choose to make their own arrangements in relation to child support, or they can contact the CSA and ask them to act on their behalf. It is not surprising then, that the expectations of this group of people were rather different from those of the mandatory clients or the NRPs, since they were proactive in becoming clients of the Agency. It should not be assumed that their expectations were particularly high, however. Many private cases were initiated because the PWC expected the CSA to provide them with regular income, and/or create a useful buffer between themselves and their ex-partners. Among these clients there was an expectation of authority, structure and reliability rather than excellent service. Some PWCs actually had very low expectations of the ability of the
Agency to obtain money for them, despite asking for their help. Several told us that they had heard of people encountering problems with the CSA, and that they had only turned to the Agency for help as a last resort or on the recommendation of their solicitor.

11.3 The (new) rules

Most of the respondents who felt they knew something about the maintenance calculation were under the impression that the CSA took 15 or 20 per cent of salary, with some indicating that the percentage increased with the number of children. There was a mix of those who said this was taken from gross income and those who thought that it came off net income (it is actually calculated as a percentage of net income). Very few people were certain about when payments would stop, and guessed that it was when their child reached 16, 18 or the end of full-time education, but usually only because social security benefits worked in this way. The rules define a qualifying child as one under age 16, or between 16 and 19 and in full-time education, not higher than ‘A’ level standard.

It was clear that of the clients who were aware that the calculations were based on a percentage of earnings, most knew that payments may be lower if the NRP shared the child care but very few knew about other factors that could be taken into account. It seemed, for example, that nobody knew how pension contributions would be accounted for, indeed one reacted as though they had broken a rule when asked whether pension contributions had been incorporated in the assessment. A considerable proportion of clients assumed that housing costs were taken into account. One was aware that travel costs could be accommodated, but others who travelled long distances to visit their children did not know that this could be taken into consideration.

Whilst some respondents’ knowledge was relatively accurate, others had potentially significant misconceptions about the rules. One NRP thought that they would pay 35 per cent for one child, and more for other children, and another assumed that it was 20 per cent per child. At least one NRP did not realise that the calculation could be reduced if they had stepchildren living in their house. This respondent told us that the wording on the form asked about ‘dependent children’ and they had not considered stepchildren to be dependants (the actual wording is relevant other children).

Some NRPs were aware that there were penalties for non-payment. PWCs were also generally of the opinion that the CSA could make NRPs pay, and take the money straight from their wages if necessary, although some recognised that their ex-partners would be difficult to trace. However, one PWC on benefits who was also a NRP believed that the CSA could not take money from benefits if they did not sign to agree to this happening.
11.4 Rule changes

Prior to contacting the CSA few people were aware of the child support reforms. Very few of the clients we spoke to were aware that the rules had changed recently despite the fact that they were current, new rules clients. This was true even when they had previous experience of the Agency. Almost everyone told us that the CSA had not told them that the rules had been changed, although some had been made aware that the computer system had been updated. Very few clients mentioned that the intention of the CSA was to reduce child poverty or that the Agency was child focused.

Of those that were aware of the reforms, one NRP had been told by a member of staff that the changes moved the emphasis away from an individual calculation to a ‘standard formula, standard issue’ approach. One respondent had been told about the new lower percentage calculation by the citizens’ advice bureau, but had not been given full information about other areas of the rules such as those relating to overnight stays. A PWC had found out about the changes because their case had moved over to the new rules as a result of a second claim. A small minority had found out about the changes through solicitors or from browsing the web.

11.5 Relationship between state benefits and child support

Several PWCs who were claiming benefits were unclear about the distinction between Income Support, tax credits (which had only recently been introduced) and child support. This was particularly noticeable among parents who had not previously claimed benefits. It seems likely that the confusion results from receiving the forms for both Income Support and child support at the same time, and from the same Jobcentre Plus officer.

Furthermore, many of the NRPs we spoke to were unaware that if their ex-partner moved on to benefits a claim for child support would be automatically triggered. It seems from the staff interviews that NRPs were not told when this was the case to protect the confidentiality of the PWC. The result of this was that often the NRP assumed that the claim was initiated by the ex-partner, perhaps in order to be spiteful.

Most PWCs realised that payments by the NRP were being offset against their Income Support, but several working NRPs assumed that all their payments were directed to the PWC, even if the PWC was claiming benefits. Indeed one told us that CSA staff had confirmed this during a telephone conversation. When NRPs became aware that most of their money would not benefit the children, they were left wondering what happened to the rest of the money:
NRP: ‘This is the strangest thing, the part I didn’t understand, because she would be entitled to ten pounds more per week, which is obviously about forty pound a month, and I was having to pay a hundred-and-ninety-two, where does all the other money go?’…I just made an assumption that it would be towards rent, which she’s getting from the benefits, I don’t know.’

(NRP, aged 30-40)

The vast majority of benefits claimants we spoke to were unaware of the Child Maintenance Premium. It is noteworthy that as a result of not knowing about the premium, one PWC said that as Income Support would cover them for any shortfalls in child maintenance their expectations of the CSA were rather irrelevant. Among those who knew that the premium entitled the PWC to up to an extra ten pounds extra a week (depending on the income of the NRP) several commented that the amount was insufficient – buying little more than a bag of nappies and wipes.

Clients were aware that PWCs who worked were able to keep all the money paid through the CSA, and some spoke about this being an incentive to work.
12 The application process

Key messages

Most applications were initiated by the parent with care either directly or via the Jobcentre Plus. Most clients who put in their own claim did so by completing a paper form, although sometimes they gave the information over the phone, or completed an electronic version on line.

It is very important that the form reaches the right person or office and is dealt with quickly. We discovered that there are frequent hold-ups because the form has been misplaced or lost somewhere between them posting it and the Child Support Agency (CSA) processing the data. It may be useful to encourage all applicants to use registered post, and perhaps to include a receipt card, which can be returned by the Agency when the form arrives giving details of a case officer if appropriate and a date by which things should have progressed.

At present, clients are waiting several weeks before questioning whether the form has arrived, because they assume the claim is being processed. For many the expectation of delays is actually causing further delays, because they do not hurry to ask questions of the Agency.

It was not uncommon for Non-resident Parents (NRPs) to tell us that they had never provided information to the CSA. Some assumed the maintenance calculation had been made using information provided by their ex-partner but others thought the information must have come from another third party (such as Inland Revenue). Those who had sent details to the Agency told us that they had also suffered forms going missing, and they were concerned about the safety of supporting evidence they had sent, such as payslips. For the NRPs we spoke to it seems that a lost form resulted in an assumption by the Agency that they were not being compliant, which did nothing to improve client relations. It may be valuable to investigate whether NRPs who provide information are more likely to remain compliant than those who never completed a form, or spoke to a member of staff.
NRPs seemed to suffer from their lack of knowledge about the Agency. Some reported that they felt victimised by the onset of a claim, and others felt they were in some way easy targets. The Agency might want to address the lack of knowledge among NRPs, so that they feel less inclined to be defensive. There is a need for more information as to why all parents must support their children, and what the CSA can do to ensure that this is happening, regardless of whether either parent is in receipt of social security benefits.

Clients were finding it difficult to speak to someone within the CSA about their case. They told us they want call times to be much shorter, both to reduce frustration, and to cut the cost of the calls. Alongside this, clients need to be able to access a member of staff who is not just friendly but who can actually help them, so that they do not have to make frequent calls and repeat their requests to various members of staff. This point also re-emphasises the need for a notepad facility on the computer system, so that staff can refer to previous notes about the client and their particular circumstances (see Part 1 for more details on the issues surrounding the computer system).

We found a wide variation in the time taken for the CSA to calculate maintenance. Some clients found that the calculation was completed within a fortnight, but others waited months. During this time some Parents with Care (PWCs) were unable to access the Child Support they needed; correspondingly some NRPs were accruing large arrears. It may be worth investigating whether a small interim payment could be requested from all working NRPs until the maintenance calculation has been processed, to provide some income for the PWC, set up the payment collection mechanism and reduce the build up of arrears.

There was a range of views expressed about the level of calculation. NRPs were concerned about the amount of money they would be left with for themselves, whether the assessment process was fair, and whether the payment would benefit their child(ren). It was not uncommon for NRPs and PWCs to comment on their income relative to the other parent, and it was clear that for a minority this was an important factor in their level of satisfaction with the maintenance calculation.

12.1 Introduction

It is important that the application process for child support is appropriate to the needs of both parents, and enables fast, accurate calculations. Delays during the application and calculation process have the potential to cause serious consequences; for example they may result in children spending a period of time in poverty, or PWCs borrowing money or falling into debt through lack of funds. Delays may also cause the build up of large arrears for NRPs, increasing their monthly payments for some time after, and affecting their ability to cover other essential outgoings. It is possible that the build up of large arrears may also affect an NRPs willingness to comply with a maintenance decision.
The child support reforms have simplified the rules and therefore enabled the Agency to produce shorter forms asking for less information than was previously required. They also aim to encourage more telephone contact between clients and staff and shorter turnaround time for cases. Turnaround should be faster as less information is required and the calculation is straightforward. In addition, the CSA can access Inland Revenue data to ascertain information about earnings when other options fail to provide the necessary information, thus decreasing the length of time taken to make the calculation and negating any need for the NRP to respond.

12.1.1 Who makes the claim?

In theory, claims for child support can be initiated by PWCs or NRPs (and, in Scotland, children over the age of 11). In fact most are initiated automatically by Jobcentre Plus (in the case of PWCs on benefits), or by the parent with care themselves. PWCs on benefits are automatically CSA clients unless they request otherwise. Then only if they can show good cause (a good reason to prefer not to contact the NRP – often because of previous violent behaviour) can they withdraw without penalty. Even then they will naturally forfeit any potential of receiving a Child Maintenance Premium, since this simply confers the right to keep a portion of the maintenance paid. Very few NRPs currently choose to approach the CSA to handle their maintenance payments, possibly because they are unaware that the option is available to them or because of their low expectations as discussed above.

When a PWC on benefits completes a claim form it is the responsibility of Jobcentre Plus to transfer the information to the CSA. This is done via the ‘Interface’, a computerised data transfer system that creates a new entry on CS2, the new CSA computer system. Claims from PWCs on benefits cannot be entered directly onto CS2, but must transfer through the Interface, otherwise the case cannot be progressed. This process allows the information provided to be verified by a face-to-face officer who may know the client well. It also gives the client the opportunity to discuss the option of stopping the claim process if they think it could put the family at risk.

12.2 Reason for claim

As mentioned above, for the majority of PWCs, the child support claim is triggered by an application for Income Support (or certain other social security benefits). Despite this, a number of clients we interviewed who were claiming benefits spoke as though they had made the decision to involve the CSA themselves. It is not clear whether or not this indicates that the way the system is presented allows people to feel in control of the decision. One PWC on benefits told us that the changes to the rules had made them decide to claim ‘because then it would make a positive difference to me and my daughter’s life.’

For private cases, the claim was often made after the PWC had suffered reduced or uncertain income caused by falling or irregular voluntary payments from the NRP. Sometimes it was simply a way for PWCs to try and get more money from NRPs because they were dissatisfied with the current arrangement, particularly if there...
was a large difference in the standard of living between the ex-partners. As mentioned above, one PWC told us that they had recently regained residency but the other partner had refused to hand over any of the child’s belongings; the CSA claim was therefore seen as a way of getting money to pay for replacements.

In some cases the PWC had been encouraged to claim by another family member; either a new partner or a parent. A few had been encouraged to claim by their solicitors. In these cases it was often the promise of regular payments and the reduction of stress from no longer having to contact the NRP directly that seemed to be driving the decision.

In one case we interviewed a PWC who had only contacted the CSA (on their solicitor’s advice) to discuss the level of maintenance that the Agency would have calculated and had never intended to become a client. This had been made quite clear by the PWC in writing and on the telephone. The PWC was understandably shocked when the CSA actioned the case and debits were made from the NRP’s bank account. In this case the situation was particularly disturbing to the PWC who was trying to avoid any disputes because the ex-partner had been violent since the separation.

Most parents wanted the CSA to provide them with money to help with the cost of bringing up their children. However, a minority of PWCs told us that they had made the child support claim primarily because they wanted help for their older children who were at university rather than their younger children. This is really a budgeting issue – they wanted more money overall to continue to provide for the whole family – but it helps to indicate the range of demands on the income of a PWC, including support for adult children.

We asked NRPs if they knew what had triggered the CSA claim. One told us that his new partner had requested that he contact the Agency because she was unhappy with his voluntary arrangement with his ex-partner. However it was very unusual for the claim to be formally initiated by the NRP; and only slightly more likely that the NRP had asked the PWC to put in a claim (not surprisingly, given the low or negative expectations of most NRPs). Many NRPs were under the impression that the child support claim against them was because their ex-partner was on benefits, or was a result of some change in the circumstances of the parent with care. However, a few did not realise that benefits claimants became mandatory clients, nor were they aware of the Maintenance Premium and these NRPs tended to assume that their ex-partners just wanted to get more money from them simply to force down their standard of living or make them suffer.

Some NRPs knew that their ex-partners were working and must have opted to contact the CSA. These parents, like those who were unaware of the rules in relation to benefits claimants, often felt that their ex-partner was using the Agency to hurt them, punish them or simply to get as much money as possible. One commented that the PWC did not think that their voluntary contribution of £10 a week from incapacity benefit had been sufficient, whilst several believed the claim was a result
of jealousy after the NRP re-married or had a child with a new partner. It is probable that NRPs feel that the CSA is used as a weapon because of the continued negative media coverage.

Some NRPs had misconceptions about the reason the CSA had contacted them. One (wrongly) felt that it was only because they had previously been married to the parent with care that the CSA were interested. Another assumed it was because they had started earning that they had become involved; conversely a small minority felt the claim was because they were on benefits and so easy to trace:

‘If I weren’t married I wouldn’t have the CSA on me’.

(NRP, aged 30-40)

12.3 Providing information

The majority of the PWCs we spoke to had completed a claim form providing information about themselves and the NRP. One PWC told us that to fill in all the information it had been necessary to phone the NRP for information. Only one NRP told us that they had not returned a form they had received, but a number of NRPs claimed not to have been asked for any information.

There does not seem to be a standard way of collecting information from the NRP for the calculation, and the various approaches did not appear to be related to employment status. Only a few of the NRPs we spoke to had been asked to provide information. Several NRPs told us they would have happily completed a form had one been sent, but as one pointed out, there was no way they were going to phone the Agency to ask for a form to be delivered.

Of the NRPs who had never provided written information, one was currently homeless and it was therefore perhaps understandable that the CSA had not sent paperwork (although the respondent had provided a work address), but another was allowed to give details of earnings over the phone, despite being self-employed and having an accountant. Others were asked only to sign and return a letter informing them of a claim against them. Despite this apparent lack of rigour, one PWC told us that a case worker phoned to check each piece of information provided by the NRP; this does not seem to have been standard practice.

Some people had difficulty understanding and completing the form they had been sent, but others told us it was straightforward. One client was dyslexic, and was grateful to staff for completing the form for her over the phone. An NRP commented that the turnaround time for NRPs to provide information was too short, at just a few days. This client thought that the form was quite daunting, and dealt with it by crossing through pages that seemed unclear or irrelevant. Others also mentioned that it was not possible to provide the level of detail required in such a short space of time. Several NRPs asked for a face-to-face officer to help them complete the form, but only one subsequently received the help requested; another consequently completed just three of the 24 pages requested.
PWCs on benefits were usually given a CSA claim form when they applied for Income Support. Some did not fill it in themselves, but went through the details with a face-to-face worker who came out to their house. Only one commented that the information requested included something that they couldn’t provide, and that was National Insurance numbers. One PWC returned four forms direct to the Agency before a member of staff realised that the information needed to be sent to them via the Jobcentre Plus Interface because the claimant was on benefits.

Most PWCs will receive their CSA form as part of the package given to them when they apply for benefits. However, private cases have to access the CSA themselves and request a form. The vast majority of those we spoke to told us that they phoned in the first instance and usually received a form soon after. Only two had used computers to access or send their forms. One worked in IT, and had e-mailed the form, whilst the other was much less confident with computers and had needed help from a family member to access Adobe’s free Acrobat Reader programme before printing a form from the CSA website.

Many clients told us that they returned more than one form, because the original had been lost. Some had also been subsequently phoned by staff who asked for details that had already been provided. The PWC who had e-mailed a form was told it was lost despite having received an e-mail confirmation that it had arrived. This person then posted a copy of the form which was also lost, and subsequently got a member of staff to complete a third copy over the phone. Clients were understandably very frustrated when forms went missing, not least because it caused delays, but also because of the amount of information requested and the length of time required to fill in a duplicate. Some sent the second copy by recorded delivery to guarantee safe arrival.

We also heard from some that payslips sent as supporting evidence were lost, either in the post or by the Agency, as was a calendar marking overnight stays and receipts indicating payments already made to support the children. In some cases this documentation had been signed for on receipt. One client gave the information for a second form over the phone because the first was lost, and then was sent the second form through the post so that it could be signed. This client was surprised to find that the envelope also contained the original documents sent with the first form to support the claim!

Very few clients complained to us about the content of the form. A very small minority thought it was intrusive, but most accepted that the information was necessary, and many had experience of completing other, similar forms. The only exceptions were those who were on the new rules but seemed to have been sent old style forms to complete. A number of male NRPs told us that they had been asked about the earnings of their new partner, much to their indignation. Indeed one told us that he was sent two follow up letters suggesting that his new partner should work full-time to supplement his income in order to be able to pay the child support.

It was clear that some clients were unsure what to do when their own circumstances...
changed, and did not know whether they were meant to let the CSA know of changes to the other party’s circumstances. Several people we spoke to had not reported changes in circumstances that may have triggered a more favourable calculation, from their financial perspective.

12.4 Telephone contact

There has been a drive within the CSA to increase the level of telephone contact between staff and clients. Staff are encouraged to phone rather than write to their clients, and the telephone system has been designed to put callers straight through to someone with knowledge of their case, rather than a general helpdesk. However, when we spoke to clients it was very apparent that the telephone system was causing frustrations and that very few people had found that they could speak to a member of staff who knew anything about them, or was able to answer their question straight away. Furthermore, staff rarely called back even when they had arranged a time to do so.

12.4.1 Frequency of contact

Some clients had regular telephone contact with the CSA whilst others had minimal contact – particularly those on benefits. The PWCs we spoke to generally had more contact with the Agency than the NRPs. More complex cases naturally required more detailed discussions, and PWCs with non-compliant ex-partners were likely to make a large number of calls.

Only a handful of clients told us that they had been called by staff, and two of these had found the call unhelpful or inconvenient. One was frustrated that the caller couldn’t provide all the information requested because some was with a different department and the other was called at work, which was very awkward.

12.4.2 Length of call

Clients often commented on the time it took to get through to a member of staff on the telephone. Whilst a few felt that the phone was answered fairly quickly, particularly in the morning, many had been holding for long periods of time in the hope that they would finally get to speak to someone. Several had continued to hold until the call had been cut off.

One woman told us that she had made a note of the keys to press to get to the right point in the automated telephone service, and she found this helped to speed things up and reduce the frustration of the call. Some of those who were irritated by the length of time taken to get through to a member of staff, commented that the dialling tone was misleading, because they were actually connected and therefore paying for the call. More worryingly, one PWC told us that they were frustrated when the music started playing because this indicated the beginning of the chargeable period (this is not the case). Long periods on hold were particularly distressing to those calling from mobiles; for example one PWC told us that a single call had cost £4 from a mobile phone.
Several respondents commented on the number and position of the offices they were put through to when contacting the helpline. Some had noticed that they were passed from office to office in different parts of the country. For example, two respondents in Reading were being dealt with by the Bristol office and the Plymouth office, neither knew why, and another in High Wycombe claimed to have been passed between Birkenhead and Dublin (almost certainly Belfast).

12.4.3 Attitude of staff

When they did finally get through, some clients felt that they were either being rushed off the phone or put through to staff who were entirely unwilling to help. A number of clients felt they were passed around from office to office or team to team as though nobody wanted to deal with their case. Many commented to us that the staff did not seem to take any notes of the discussion, often did not action the call, and could not recall information from previous conversations.

Very few clients felt they had been consistently treated well on the telephone, although a few noted that some members of staff were polite and helpful. One said that she thought the staff were very good, and nice to her, but that she realised that she was easy to please after being treated particularly badly by her ex-husband. An NRP thought that one person had treated them well, but commented that the others were like ‘a brick wall’. Others pointed out that staff appeared helpful and competent whilst on the phone, but then didn’t do the work they had promised to do, resulting in repeated calls. One client claimed that staff sounded disinterested, and another was frustrated that after getting through to the helpline she was told to go to the local jobcentre if she had any further questions.

A few people were happy to just get through to someone who would listen, and seemed to particularly appreciate staff who appeared to agree with them, or acknowledge that something seemed to be wrong. Some were grateful when staff shared confidences with them, such as telling them that they had been through similar break ups. However, many people rued the lack of an available caseworker, noting that either they did not have a specific person to deal with, or that their case worker was never available. One claimed that staff refused to accept any responsibility for their case. Another said of caseworkers ‘they’re rubbish’, having come to the firm conclusion that hers simply did not exist. A PWC told us she was directed to someone she thought was her case worker only to be told that she wasn’t because the case hadn’t progressed far enough:

‘It’s not real good to actually speak to someone that you don’t know or anything.’

(PWC, <30 year old)

‘[I didn’t even know] I had a special person doing my work for me, so it did seem that they didn’t give you much information.’

((PWC, <30 year old)

One PWC living in a women’s refuge had a particularly complicated case, and would
certainly have benefited from having a member of staff who knew her case in depth. This PWC was claiming against two NRPs, only one of whom was compliant. She told us that CSA staff often contacted her with information about the wrong dad or complained that they found the case too complicated to help with. Staff at the refuge had also tried to get through to someone who could help on behalf of this client and faced the same frustrations, often trying throughout the day for several days before speaking to someone.

A minority of clients appeared to have a caseworker, and some were even told what times to call to catch that person in work. However, even one of these noted that she could give information during one call and be asked for it again the next time. Some clients persisted in asking for the same person, even when it became apparent that their case was not really being dealt with by any one person, and seemed to feel some kind of benefit from having a named contact.

Occasionally clients told us that it paid to be persistent, although one told us that they asked to speak to a manager after facing a number of problems and were refused. One client who was facing problems told staff that she was participating in this research project and found that they called her back within ten minutes, with the information she needed. Some dissatisfied clients took the advice of staff and made a formal complaint about the delays they faced. Two noted that since complaining they were given a specific contact and only had to deal with that one member of staff for a while, which they appreciated. Even then, one of these respondents told us that once the original problem was solved the member of staff said they could do no further work on the case, and handed the client over to someone else.

There was some concern voiced about treatment of male clients although this feeling was not noted by all the men we interviewed. It was also of some concern that the CSA were still asking some NRPs for details about the income of their new partners, despite them being on the new rules (the old rules did require this information before an assessment could be made). One male client felt that the CSA staff were overwhelmingly female (which is mostly correct), and were biased against men. Despite this he felt that the staff he had dealt with had been polite. Another man thought that the CSA trusted the information from the mother more than that from fathers; others commented that the CSA was unwilling to listen to the father’s ‘side of the story’. A female client told us that her ex-partner complained to her that he had been spoken to at work in a way that had made him raise his voice in response, something he was very upset about.

It is interesting in the context of this perceived biased to consider a female NRP we spoke to who was pleased with the level of support she got:

‘...but as I spoke to them on the ‘phone they were brilliant. They sent all leaflets out and what have you so I could read them. They were really good and I felt, you know, they was quite understanding and they didn’t judge, and I suppose...’
it's a little bit embarrassing being a woman, having to pay and pour your heart out to somebody that you don’t see your own son. That is very very – I find that difficult.’

(NRP, >40 years old)

Some women on benefits also felt discriminated against. One felt that staff did not take her seriously because she was claiming benefits. Another was accused of ‘knowing too much’ and told that only private clients really cared whether the case was progressing or not:

‘You obviously know someone who works for the CSA. You know far too much about the process, ... Well, if you don’t know anybody then, how come you know to use such phrases as Interface?’ ... ‘I don’t know anybody who works for the CSA. I don’t understand, even if I did, what you’re thinking I’d have to gain by this’. But she was so snotty, and it was unbelievable, and it was like, ‘oh you’re on Income Support, you’re a single mother on Income Support. How dare you question anything that’s happening?’.’

(PWC, aged 30-40)

This line of discussion also reinforces the point made earlier, that it appears not all staff are aware of the new Child Maintenance Premium. Until the recent reforms, there was no immediate financial benefit from child support for PWCs claiming Income Support.

It was less common for clients to feel that staff treated all clients fairly, but a few did make it clear that perception of fairness had been important to them:

‘You always get the impression that they are very neutral and for that I thank them because I think that would be totally unsuitable and inappropriate to be the other way’.

(PWC, aged 30-40)

We spoke to one NRP who had a good relationship with his ex-wife and was surprised at the number of times that one partner was told one thing whilst the other was told something different. It was clear to this person that the staff were telling the mother what she wanted to hear but not the truth, and this was causing friction between the two of them. Other clients told us that the staff had made out that the NRP had missed payments when they were confident that this was not the case.

12.5 Calculation

Child Support can only be paid out to the family for whom it was collected. PWCs do not access funds in a central pot; they rely entirely on the ability of the CSA and the compliance of their ex-partner to collect the money they need.
We asked clients about the length of time they waited for a maintenance calculation and whether they received anything in writing to explain how the calculation was made, or what the payments would be. We also questioned how well they understood how the decision had been reached and whether they felt it was an acceptable one.

As noted above, some clients were moderately well-informed about the powers of the CSA and the method of calculation. Some had acquired information from their solicitor or accessed information on the website, whilst others had some knowledge about the powers of the CSA from friends who had been through the system. However, the majority had only sketchy details and seemed not to have made any attempt to find out more.

A small number of the clients we spoke to had contacted the CSA to discuss probable calculations rather than to initiate a claim or inform them of changes. They faced problems when trying to access information in this way. In one case an NRP was looking to return to work and wanted to know how much they would be paying and was sent three separate assessments for different amounts without explanation. Another asked for information only, but discovered that a full claim had been activated.

12.5.1 Time taken to make the calculation

Most of the PWCs we interviewed told us that the calculation had taken at least a month to complete. A very small minority had been calculated within two weeks, but some had taken ten months or more.

The consequences of the time taken to complete the calculation impacted on both the NRPs and the PWCs. PWCs were often left without this source of income until the calculation was complete, and several told us that family had to help them out until the NRP started paying. NRPs talked about the impact of high arrears calculations caused by the time taken to progress the case from initial application to calculation. Some claimed to be left with no disposable income, and even a PWC commented that it was unrealistic to expect NRPs to put money to one side to cover backdated payments as had been suggested by a member of staff.

12.5.2 Understanding the calculation

A few clients told us that staff had explained the calculation to them over the phone. Despite the fact that the new rules are much simpler, some clients were confused about what they had been told. For instance one told us that the calculation had been explained and that the NRP would have to pay 75 per cent of net income – 25 per cent per child, for three children, rather than 25 per cent overall.

Some clients had received a standard letter setting out the payment level and explaining how the calculation had been made. Occasionally, respondents told us that they had received several letters indicating different levels of liability. Other
participants, and in particular NRPs on benefits, could not recall having being sent any explanation of the calculations.

Letters relating to the calculation did not always provide the information that clients needed. In one case a PWC was frustrated to receive a letter saying that the calculated level was £0000 per month (i.e. zero) without explanation, when the PWC knew that the NRP was earning a good salary working in IT. Some NRPs were surprised to receive calculations when they had not provided any information about their income. They wanted to know on what basis the calculation had been made. Conversely a PWC was given more information than she needed in a letter that laid out how much the NRP paid to another ex-partner as well as to herself.

It was clear that some respondents had not read the calculation details fully (we noted a small number of cases where new partners had taken more notice of the letter than the NRP had). This resulted in the NRP feeling ill-informed about the reason behind the calculation decision. Misunderstandings were not uncommon, for example a PWC told us that the rate described in the calculation letter was a flat rate of £5 for every £200 earned, plus 25 per cent of the rest of their ex-partner’s money. The NRP in this case was assessed as being liable to pay £30 a week.

If the NRP pays more than £10 a week, PWCs do not get to keep the full amount of money paid (unless it includes arrears payments). This money is offset against their benefits. One client was told that it is held in an account and will be given to her when she returns to work. The majority of PWCs on benefits were aware how much money the NRP was actually paying despite the fact that in most cases they were receiving little or none of the money. There is also some confusion concerning the role of the Child Maintenance Premium.

12.5.3 Level of calculation

Some NRPs felt that the calculation was fair and reflected what they felt able to pay. Some also noted that the payments took into account money they had already paid to their ex-partners. A few NRPs did not seem overly bothered by the level of the calculation, but were more concerned that the method of assessing their ability to pay was fair. Some added that they were less concerned with the amount than the use of the money; they wanted to know that the money they paid was benefiting their children:

‘...it’s Child Support Agency not the Wife Support Agency.’

(NRP, >40 years old)

One NRP had asked to have the calculation reconsidered, because they had been working large amounts of overtime to pay off significant debts accrued before the separation. This client felt that the additional overtime meant that the figures used by the CSA were not representative of usual income. Whilst this NRP had declared all income, a number of PWCs felt that the calculation level was unreasonably low because their ex-partners were not declaring supplementary income from part-time jobs or overtime. These clients told us that there were noticeable discrepancies
between the living standards of their ex-partner and their assessed earnings. One PWC had complained to CSA staff about the low maintenance decision, and asked them to look at Inland Revenue records for a more accurate indication of the NRPs earnings, but staff were very reluctant to do this.

One PWC who felt they understood the calculation was frustrated that the ex-partner did not have to pay one-seventh of the full amount because the child stayed overnight. The PWC told us that the child had tea before going and ate a breakfast provided by the PWC then left for school, and so cost the NRP virtually nothing to keep for one night. Conversely, several NRPs were disappointed that the calculation did not take into account their contribution to the cost of caring for their child unless the child stayed overnight – which in itself might incur few or no costs.

Some respondents thought there were genuine mistakes in the calculations, but their concerns were not always dealt with appropriately. Indeed one self-employed NRP who asked for the calculation to be corrected because it used gross takings rather than net salary, was threatened with proceedings for withholding information.

Several participants commented that the CSA seemed unable to deal with problems that arose when setting up payments. One had faced a number of difficulties setting up payment, and when this was pointed out the payments stopped completely:

‘...it’s like if you mention something to the CSA it totally throws them.’

(PWC, aged 30-40)

12.5.4 Changes in circumstances

Even in the relatively short time between the introduction of the new rules and the fieldwork for this research a number of NRPs and PWCs had faced significant changes of circumstances that would have triggered recalculations. Some had been reluctant to tell the CSA about changes in their own circumstances or that of their ex-partner because of the bad service they had received initially. However others did inform the CSA of a change, and some were surprised by the outcome. One PWC told us that their ex-partner was made redundant and was therefore reassessed, but the assessed level did not drop from the £246 a month being paid whilst the NRP was working.

12.6 Overall level of service

Some clients felt they had experienced good service from particular members of staff and we spoke to several appreciative clients who felt that they had benefited from the services of the Agency. Of particular note were two NRPs who felt well supported, listened to and treated as individuals by staff.
We also heard many examples of poor service and dissatisfaction among clients. This ranged from staff who were ‘unhelpful to the point of insulting’, to those who were quite rude to clients. We were told that one member of staff refused to put a dissatisfied client through to a manager. Clients were also frustrated by duplicated or missing paperwork and slow and inaccurate calculations.

Those parents who had called the helpline many times mentioned that in addition to staff inadequacies there were often computer problems. Sometimes the problems were holding up their claims, other times they just prevented staff from accessing their details:

‘lines are down on the computer…I’ve had that one loads of times.’
(PWC, aged 30-40)

‘…they told me they’d spent six hundred million pounds on it...Sorry, I don’t wanna know, I’ve got a problem’.
(NRP, >40 years old)
13 Impact

**Key messages**

The majority of Non-resident Parents (NRPs) we spoke to were paying something towards Child Maintenance, unless they had been assessed to pay nothing. However a number of the Parents With Care (PWCs) had non-compliant or partially compliant ex-partners. Some PWCs on benefits were unsure whether the maintenance was being paid. Moreover, some PWCs were under the impression that their ex-partner was paying regularly, but that the Child Support Agency (CSA) was having problems forwarding the money to them. The Agency is responsible for accessing funds for some of the most vulnerable families in society and it is clearly important that everything possible is done both to encourage compliance and to solve the problems with the payment system so that these families can receive the money due to them.

We heard from PWCs that the money they received as Child Maintenance was spent on essentials for the children, such as shoes and school uniform. However some of the NRPs were of the opinion that the money went to the PWC, and was not always spent on, or for the benefit of, the children. It might be possible to overcome this discrepancy by asking the PWC to provide some breakdown of probable expenditure on the children, to bring into focus the needs of the child.

It is encouraging that we found little evidence that CSA contact had altered relationships between parents and children. There were however a few instances where the relationship between the parents had deteriorated, and in one case this was felt to be due to the way staff treated the father. It is very difficult for the Agency to get the right balance between impressing on parents the importance of providing for their children without exception, and providing a service that does put undue pressure on one party. It seems that in some cases the right balance has not been reached.
13.1 Introduction

Being involved with the CSA has had an impact on the lives of many of the clients we spoke to. Their financial circumstances may have been affected by the payment and some have been encouraged or discouraged from making decisions such as looking for work, allowing access to their children or starting a second family.

13.2 Compliance

Almost half of the NRPs on benefits that we spoke to were asked to pay nothing at all. One of these was also a PWC and had been told there was nothing to pay, and another claimed that they wanted to pay, because of concerns of arrears, but that the money had never been taken from their benefits. Two other NRPs on benefits were made no worse off by the involvement of the CSA since they were also PWCs and consequently paid and received £5 a week.

The other NRPs on benefits had been assessed to pay £5 or, in one case, £2.50. In most cases the money was automatically taken from the benefits payment. One of those paying £5 was a mature student claiming Income Support and a disability allowance who felt unable to pay but was having the money deducted at source. This NRP complained to us that the system is contradictory, since Income Support gives you the amount you need to live on, then the CSA take some away from you. Another NRP also tried unsuccessfully to prevent payments being deducted from Income Support, because they felt that it was unfair given that the ex-partner gained more from the sale of their house, and was earning a reasonable salary. However not all NRPs were angry at having to pay money from their benefits, indeed one NRP admitted to regularly paying additional money to his/her ex-partner in cash.

Only in exceptional cases were non-working NRPs able to prevent payments being taken automatically. For example we spoke to one who was disputing paternity, but not intending to remain non-compliant. Indeed he felt strongly that £5 was too little to pay if the child was indeed his. His only concern was to confirm or disprove his ex-wife’s allegations that he was not the father.

Working NRPs were more likely to be assessed as able to make contributions. They were also perhaps more able to avoid payment than those on benefits, since most paid the money to the CSA through the bank or by payment book, rather than having it deducted automatically. Four working NRPs would not tell us how much they were paying. Two claimed to be paying nothing. One of these was a young NRP on a very low income and was possibly not earning over £100 per week. The other was in dispute with the parent with care about access. It seems that this person was unwilling to consider making any payments until access issues had been addressed. Of those who told us how much they were paying, weekly payments among NRPs ranged from £32 to £100 (including arrears where appropriate). One NRP told us that he had not told the CSA what his earnings were because he was annoyed that he had been asked about his new wife’s earnings. As the CSA had nonetheless
made a calculation he assumed that the information must have come from another third party, such as the Inland Revenue.

Partial compliance can also cause problems for PWCs who are trying to budget, and have little or no capacity to cover shortfalls. We were told by just two NRPs that they had not met every payment on time. One of these claimed that the CSA had lost the first cheque sent, but that payments were since made online, without problem. The other paid most weeks, but had missed one payment because of illness, and another was paid late because of problems with the completion of the sale of their house.

Only one NRP we spoke to sounded particularly defiant about payment. This person was of the opinion that both parents should be free to spend what they felt was appropriate on the child rather than the PWC getting the money and making all the decisions. However, several others told us that they were annoyed that they had no control over how the money they paid would be spent; one suggested that it should be put into a trust fund for the child which could not be accessed until the child reached 18 (or 21) and another felt it was the CSA’s responsibility to check that the money was spent on the child.

There are a number of sanctions available to the CSA to encourage and enforce payments. Other than a few mentions of payments being deducted from earnings, very few people knew what the punishments were. Some spoke vaguely of being put in prison for non-payment, but this did not appear to alter behaviour. In fact the only people that sounded concerned about the threats used to increase compliance were the kind of people most likely to obey authority in the first place. Furthermore, some of these people found the aggressive tone of letters and leaflets from the CSA offensive or intimidating. One was upset with the phrase ‘non-payment can affect the welfare of your child’ particularly as the non-payment was through no fault of his.

Lack of compliance was much more apparent when talking to PWCs. It seems that a number of them had received none of the money expected, and many had faced delays or irregular or incomplete payments. Some were frustrated that the CSA did not do more to guarantee a regular income from their ex-partner, for example by ordering deductions from earnings. One PWC told us that their ex-partner was paying just £1 a week of the £30 owed. Despite this staff apparently would not order a deduction of earnings.

We spoke to two PWCs whose ex-partners were in prison and so were not liable to pay child support. A further two PWCs were told that they would not receive any payments. A small number were entitled to £5 from their ex-partners benefits, and were actually receiving it. Of the remaining PWCs some were receiving benefits, but were certain that they were not getting the £10 a week they were entitled to, even though they knew their ex-partners were paying something. One was keeping £70 a month, which seemed very high but she had been told she was entitled to it even though she was on benefits. She was very uncertain about the validity of this advice;
we assume that £30 a month was to cover arrears. Those PWCs that talked about the amount assessed were entitled to between £0 and £85 per week, including arrears. (The highest payment was a reduction from the original calculation after the NRP was made redundant and took a lower paid job.)

The largest regular payment being received was just £37 a week including arrears, and this involved a deduction from earnings order (DEO). Of those paying freely from earned income, only one was paying a regular amount, on time. This NRP was paying £30 a week, on time, but had been assessed to pay £50 per week. The PWC was told there was very little the CSA could do to make the ex-partner pay the full amount, and the Agency had not sent an amended payment schedule to take into account the arrears caused by the underpayment.

Some PWCs told us that the money they were owed was being paid by their ex-partner but was not being paid to them. One was told there were computer problems preventing the payment being put into their account. Another had an old case and the NRP was paying via a deduction of earnings. This case was reactively migrated and the payments stopped. When they started again the money went into an old joint account belonging to the NRP and PWC that was overdrawn, and we were told that they therefore could not draw out the full amount – only managing to access about a third of the payments.

Some PWCs requested giro payments. Two parents told us that the giros were for the wrong post office. One was sent giros for a post office that had been closed for some time, and another who lived in an urban area was sent giros for a rural post office over 20 miles away. Both of these interviewees told us that they had a considerable amount of difficulty getting the giros changed to the right post office. Furthermore, one had sent hers back to the CSA, who told her they had not been received. She is now unsure whether they have repaid this money.

One client had requested payment into her bank account. She was therefore surprised to get giro payments. She told us that she did not know what to do with them, as she had not had any reason to receive a giro before.

There was some confusion about the money received by PWCs on benefits, which may have stemmed from the rule change. An NRP who was compliant was under the impression that his ex-partner was able to keep all the money he paid, and he claimed that the CSA had agreed that this was the case. One PWC was under the impression that the CSA would release the payments over and above the £10 per week premium once she returned to work, almost like a savings scheme. This confuses the old scheme and the new scheme (on the old scheme there was an element of payback via the Child Maintenance Bonus if the PWC returned to work, but no Child Maintenance Premium). She also told us she had been expecting about £70 per week, and felt that even £30 a week would be more appropriate for three children than the £10 she was getting:
'She explained it goes into a pot, if I go back to work that I will get it and stuff like that. She went through it all and I said ‘fair enough do it’ so she put the claim in there and then...She said I would get £10.00 a week extra in my Income Support. That was all I would get, £10.00 a week in my Income Support and they would hold the rest in this pot or whatever.’

(PWC, aged 30-40)

PWCS told us that some NRPs had the full intention of paying voluntarily, then slipped for some reason and either paid less often or a lower amount. One PWC told us that the NRP paid £40 regularly for about eight weeks then stopped. Since the CSA became involved this NRP has paid considerably less ‘to be awkward’.

13.3 Impact of money paid or received

This section of the report necessarily describes the impact of the calculation on NRPs and PWCS separately. The system is, of course, designed to re-distribute money from NRPs to PWCS, to support children. We should therefore expect to find that NRPs are made worse off and PWCS better off. The key questions relate to how far these changes are apparent, and whether they have additional consequences.

13.3.1 Impact on PWCS

Typically, PWCS who were receiving payments through the CSA told us the money was very important to them, and enabled them to buy things for their children, such as school clothes, shoes and outdoor coats. For example, one PWC on benefits told us she was receiving arrears payments and therefore had enough money to make these more expensive purchases that she could not have managed from her benefits. Others felt that they were fortunate to get the child maintenance money given so that they could earn a reasonable income in addition to the regular payments from their ex-partner. One parent with a large family was pleased that they didn’t have to return to full-time work to support the young children, and told us that the money could go towards essentials such as shoes and clothes, as well as a much needed family holiday. This PWC commented that higher payments would allow them to stop working but the NRPs new partner would be forced to continue working to help cover the payments and that would be unfair.

Some PWCS were pleased to receive regular payments but disappointed that the money was less than they had been getting under voluntary arrangements. As a result some were telling their children to ask the NRP for money towards clothes or school trips. Some also told us that arrears payments made it difficult in some ways because it was easy to become accustomed to the larger monthly income and difficult to see how they would cope when the payment dropped to the calculated level. However the more optimistic ones thought that the rate may go up again when their ex-partners found their feet and moved to better jobs.
Only one parent with care who was working and receiving over £40 a month felt that the money was insufficient to have a positive impact. This PWC had suffered a particularly bitter break-up and appeared to be angry that the money from the CSA was inadequate to cover rent, resulting in the family living with the maternal grandparents.

In a few cases, the PWC felt that the overall impact of the involvement of the CSA had been negative despite their ex-partners being compliant. Two commented that they had spent more on telephone calls to the CSA than had been paid so far as child maintenance. Another pointed out that she was on benefits, and so not substantially better off, but her ex-partner was considerably worse off since paying maintenance and could no longer afford to take his child out on trips, or buy him any extras such as clothes. This undoubtedly had a negative impact on the child. In one case the NRP was telling the children that the PWC, who was on benefits, could buy them whatever they wanted because of the amount of maintenance they were receiving. This clearly put the PWC in a difficult position.

Some PWCs were not getting any money from the CSA and so the discussion of impact focused on how difficult it was for them to manage and whether a regular payment would be beneficial. Some parents on benefits who were not receiving the Child Maintenance Premium they were entitled to were not unduly worried, because they were used to managing on a very low income. Others, however, including those who had a relatively comfortable standard of living before separation, felt that an extra payment would be hugely beneficial. Some households were finding it very hard to cope on benefit payments, and we saw some families living in very unsatisfactory accommodation without, for example, carpets or proper heating. In these cases a home visit by the CSA (or someone connected to the Social Fund, perhaps) could have served to highlight the importance of prioritising these claimants.

The support of a new partner was important to a lot of families we spoke to, and it was noticeable that the standard of living of those PWCs who had re-partnered tended to be marginally higher than those who remained single. But the strain of having no child support was noticeable. One PWC told us that because her ex-partner did not support his four children her new partner was responsible for supporting seven children in total, which put pressure on their relationship. Only one PWC we spoke to who was not receiving money felt that since putting in the claim the unpaid maintenance was no longer an issue, and this was because their new partner had found work and could support the family without the £5 a week expected from the ex-partner.

Furthermore, some parents who were not receiving payments through the CSA could imagine how much better off they would be if they were return to work, and were frustrated that despite access to good local childcare and the offers of help from family they were unlikely to be financially better off unless they started to get the payments due from the CSA. Others commented that they could imagine how
they would benefit if their ex-partner returned to work, and that in that case it would encourage them to look for a job too.

13.3.2 Impact on NRPs

For some NRPs who were willing to pay maintenance voluntarily, involvement with the CSA has been a negative experience. We heard from several who had happily provided support until their ex-partners started to claim benefits. These NRPs felt that the CSA calculations did not take into account that they had regularly made payments and spent money on their children. One told us that despite paying £100 a month, and providing all clothes, school equipment and overnight stays of up to five nights a week (not every week), he was now expected to pay almost £300 a month to cover a calculation of £180 a month plus back payments.

A number of NRPs told us that their ex-partners were ‘playing the system’ – fraudulently claiming Income Support or other benefits. Some had been caught whilst others were apparently continuing to claim. One told us how frustrating it was to know that the only reason the CSA was involved in the case was because of a fraudulent claim for Income Support. This NRP had provided much of the support and care for the child and would have much rather given the 16 year old son the money for food and clothes directly.

NRPs had several concerns in relation to the money they were paying. For some, it was difficult to meet their other commitments, or to live independently because of the size of their child support payments. One was finding it particularly difficult to make ends meet because they were also paying maintenance through a private agreement to another ex-partner. Some were doubly frustrated because they knew that not only was the payment was making them suffer, but it was having little impact on the lives of their children, since the benefits system allows the PWC to keep only £10 of the payment.

Several NRPs voiced to us the frustration of having their ‘freedom’ taken away when the CSA became involved. Those who had previously paid voluntarily told us that they had bought clothes, treats or outings for their children, sometimes in addition to providing for some of the day-to-day needs of their children. They found that once the CSA was involved all their spare money was diverted straight to their ex-partner, and they were no longer able to make decisions about what to pay for, nor financially able to provide outings and treats for their children when they saw them. This did lead to bitterness in some cases, both with the PWC and the CSA, and to some discomfort between NRPs and their children who did not fully understand the complexities of the financial arrangements:

‘I think it’s made me more – it’s contributed to the bitterness’

(NRP, >40 years old)

One NRP on Jobseeker’s Allowance voiced to us concerns about the impact of the likely calculation if they were to return to work. Whilst this was not discouraging them from searching for work, it did seem that there was a particular focus on staying within the £100 – £150 per week bracket.
The CSA did not have a negative impact on all the NRPs we spoke to. One felt that it was much better having money taken automatically than ‘me just turning up once a month with a cheque’ and thought it had made it easier for both partners.

A minority mentioned that the only discussions they had with their ex-partner were in relation to money or the CSA which was something they regretted.

13.4 Impact on relationships

We found very little evidence to suggest that contact with the CSA had affected the relationship between parents and children. A few thought that the overnight stay rule may have encouraged them to seek regular contact, but others noted that the NRP was surprised to discover that overnight stays actually resulted in lower maintenance calculations.

In a small number of cases, contact with the CSA made the relationship between ex-partners deteriorate still further. This usually happened when the NRP felt threatened by the CSA or was under the impression that the PWC was being purposefully spiteful. One PWC felt that her ex-partner had become violent towards her as a direct result of the contact with the CSA who, she felt, had treated him as a criminal:

‘It really, really wounded him, it really did, and that was basically the reason why I stopped collecting from them.’

(PWC, aged 30-40)

13.5 Other impact issues

A minority of NRPs told us that the pressure of being involved with the CSA had made them consider changing things in their lives. One told us that if it wasn’t for the children they would ‘disappear’, another had considered giving up work after paying off the arrears. There were a number of clients who were suffering from depression, some of whom were claimed to be suicidal, but it should certainly not be assumed that all, or indeed any such cases are a result of the actions of the CSA. One, for example, was especially distraught because of a complete lack of access to his children, and was considering moving abroad. Whilst this is in some ways related to the issue of child support it is entirely outside the remit of the Agency.

One NRP, whose ex-partner was on benefits, commented that the PWC might be encouraged to go to work because of the additional money she would be entitled to from his contributions. He was not entirely happy about this because he would rather the money was not spent on expensive childcare, and because he wasn’t keen on her working whilst the child was young. Conversely another NRP, who was not aware of the Child Maintenance Premium, thought that the CSA encouraged PWCs to stay at home. This NRP was also under the impression that if he didn’t pay he could be denied access to his children. We also heard the reverse of this from a PWC who thought that if she went through the CSA it would mean that the NRP would want contact with their children. This was not something she wanted to happen.
What clients believe needs changing

Key messages

Whilst some clients praised how they had been dealt with, many had suggestions or raised wider issues that related to a combination of policy and practice. Among issues relating to the new scheme:

- Compliant Non-resident Parents (NRPs) were irritated that child support could not be established for resident step-children.
- Shared care gave financial incentives for Parents With Care (PWCs) to reduce some types of contact between children and the NRP.
- Child support was resented if there were ongoing issues about contact.
- Awareness of the (£10) Child Maintenance Premium was very low.

Clients tended to have low expectations of the Child Support Agency (CSA), which meant that delays were often anticipated. What was more surprising to people was having to provide information more than once, or staff not responding to agreements to call back. Clients also expected the agency to have more ‘teeth’ in being able to extract money from NRPs. They were sometimes surprised that considerable effort appeared to go into cases that would necessarily yield only very small amounts of money.

Some clients would have appreciated face-to-face contact. Whilst this is available in principle, it did not appear to have been offered or suggested to anyone we spoke to. This might have helped deal with more complex cases. In a similar vein, clients would have preferred a genuine caseworker to have dealt with their case, and/or for information provided to have been available to subsequent staff (e.g. as might have happened through a notepad-style facility).
14.1 Introduction

Each client interviewed was given the opportunity to suggest ideas for improving the child support system, and the CSA in particular. Most people were able to point to areas where they believed improvement was needed, and made suggestions variously relating to the policy, its implementation and dealing with staff. The perspectives of NRPs and PWCs were often rather different, but views about the running of the CSA were often similar.

Even so, there were a few clients who were keen to praise the way the Agency had dealt with their case. In some instances all had gone to plan, and as a result these people had no or few suggestions for change. One mother was receiving a relatively large amount of child support, higher than a previous voluntary agreement, and had experienced few problems when this was set up by CSA. She simply declared: ‘I’m very happy. I can’t fault them in any way.’ Where money was flowing regularly, at a reasonable level, and had been set up quickly, satisfaction with the CSA tended to be high and the clients exceedingly grateful. Such cases were, however, a small minority among those we spoke to. Despite this, they do show that when things go well it is much appreciated by clients, and also that the mechanisms are in place to allow such cases to happen.

In exploring the suggestions for improvement, we should remember that all of us might wish for better and more rapid service, tailored to our own individual needs, from any Government agency or other type of organisation. Our expectations will however be mediated by our experience. It might be nice if, say, a mobile phone company reduced our bills owing to particular personal circumstances, but we don’t generally expect this to happen. Nor do we usually take a view on how service organisations spend the money we have paid to them. With the CSA, matters may at least appear to be different. There are fewer precedents governing what people expect and whilst CSA now has a developing history, people’s knowledge of it tends to come through the media or in a second-hand way. It may also be more difficult to think in a neutral way about one’s funds going to a previous partner, who may have different spending priorities to one’s own. Nevertheless, the answers provided were often thoughtful and insightful and not simply a ‘wish list’. Often the remarks appeared perfectly reasonable.

14.2 Policy

Some respondents were able to comment on matters that were related to the general policy. Often this was through their personal experience, but they could also generalise about it.

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6 Conversely, those aware of particular allowances or discounts and taking advantage of them might be seen either as ‘playing the system’ or simply acting within normal standards of behaviour.
14.2.1 Stepfamilies

Some NRPs were in families with stepchildren. The calculation takes into account the number of children living in their household, in setting the level of maintenance. However, some NRPs objected to the fact that the CSA was unable to extract money from the absent parent (usually father) of these stepchildren, whilst they were paying money to their ex-partner for their own biological children. It could seem that they were responsible both for children living with them, and their natural children and they were therefore expected to shoulder two sets of responsibilities.

One highly compliant NRP was also a stepfather, and he talked about CSA’s record with his stepchild’s NRP:

‘Her husband paid no maintenance at all. Assessment was made by the CSA, he gave up work. He then started up on a farm, but said that all the money he had was going into running the farm, so he wasn’t paying again. He then carried on working, running this farm, he remarried, he lives in a house now worth close to half a million pounds, runs a business, and in eight years we never had a penny…he takes three holidays a year…he has just bought my former stepdaughter a new horse,…they’ve got four horses, a stable, two cars, …’

(NRP, >40 years old)

This also highlights issues around the ability of CSA to deal with ‘clever’ NRPs. Many people believed that CSA could not adequately manage to collect money or relevant information from such groups.

14.2.2 Shared care

Where NRPs have care of their children for at least one night a week (on average) then generally maintenance is reduced by one-seventh for each night. Where parents try to share care exactly equally, the level of maintenance required may be reduced substantially – but there is still some expectation of payment. The PWC is generally identified as the person receiving Child Benefit and this can never be shared – though if there are two or more children in the family then different people may be receiving Child Benefit. Where parents have tried to share care equally, the requirement for one to pay the other (usually the man to pay the woman) may appear odd. One NRP expressed it this way:

‘…we are equal parents and went into it as equal parents and come out of it as equal parents, and I have him half of the time, and I pay for the other half. I don’t understand that, I really don’t understand it.’

(NRP, >40 years old)

For most parents there was no such ambition to be equal in this way, and so no-one else interviewed expressed it quite as forcibly.

Different rules apply to benefits cases (where any shared care leads to a zero assessment) and other low-income cases (where shared care of any amount makes
no difference). Whilst some staff mentioned this as anomalous, and potentially unfair to low-paid NRPs, none of the parents was sufficiently well-informed to have picked up on this. However some did perceive that additional contact meant a lower maintenance assessment.

14.2.3 Contact and cash

At the time of writing, and indeed during fieldwork, the activities of pressure groups have generated considerable publicity for fathers’ lack of contact with their children. In particular, their contention that some fathers are denied contact with their natural children, despite courts mandating that such contact is expected or indeed a right. For some NRPs, payment of maintenance was their side of the ‘deal’, and the PWC’s side is to facilitate regular contact between the children and their NRP.

In legal and policy terms, contact and payment of maintenance are formally entirely separate – maintenance does not mean contact, and no maintenance does not mean no contact. In many people’s minds, however, each amounts to ‘doing the right thing’. When things got bad, which seemed frequent among CSA clients, each side of this deal could be viewed as their potential leverage on the other parent. NRPs may relate that they shouldn’t be paying if the PWC is denying access, and certainly some NRPs did take this view. Conversely PWCs may resent access if maintenance is not being paid, for whatever reason. Any emphasis or acknowledgement of the needs and preferences of the children are easily lost in such narratives.

In common with other research, parents were often keen to link issues of access and child support – indeed sometimes to bring in wider considerations of ‘blame’ as well. Whilst policy has been to keep these aspects separate, for some it is regarded as unacceptable that progress towards the one is rigorously enforced whilst the other goes untackled.

14.2.4 £10 disregard (Child Maintenance Premium)

Until the 2003 reforms, where a PWC received Income Support any maintenance received counted as income and reduced benefit payments. A scheme – the Child Maintenance Bonus – did make provision for some of this to be paid out on moving into paid work, in the last few years before the new reforms. By contrast, maintenance had not been counted as income against in-work tax credits since the introduction of Working Families’ Tax Credit in 1999. However, it was counted as income against its predecessor Family Credit, with a £15 disregard.

Maintenance should, at least in principle, act as an incentive to move into paid work. All of it counts as income when working, but any amount above £10 is deducted for non-working PWCs receiving Income Support. Knowledge of this was somewhat limited, among both PWCs and NRPs. However, some did appear to know the rules well. One NRP told us that his ex-partner had offered to ‘call off’ the CSA, who would have asked for at least £30 a week, in return for ‘only’ £20 a week in cash. He had not realised that this would have left her £10 a week better off, since she received Income Support. Other NRPs were unaware that their maintenance payment was not transferred in full to the PWC.
The idea of maintenance as a work incentive, whilst highly plausible and supported by some evidence, must also counter two possibilities. First, that many PWCs who are poor will often have ex-partners (NRPs) who are also relatively poor and thus assessed for low amounts of maintenance. Second, incentives are also generated to receive maintenance informally and not via CSA. This may result in a lower level being paid, but not being deducted from benefit. Indeed a couple of NRPs insisted that PWCs were receiving maintenance directly that was not being declared. Several also had stories of undeclared incomes of various kinds, and of undeclared partners and the like.

Overall, many did not realise that maintenance paid to non-working PWCs was used to reduce amounts of Income Support paid. Since the policy was partly aimed at reducing child poverty, this did not make sense to many people – who suspected it was the Government giving with one hand but taking with the other.

14.3 Practice/implementation

It is disappointing to report that, for many clients, their main hope was that the CSA would function in what would be regarded as a generally efficient way. In other words, that calls would be answered, staff would get back to them if this was agreed, and they would not have to repeat information or send in the same details more than once. All too often these relatively modest aspirations were not met. Instead many clients mentioned problems getting hold of people, and getting action on their particular cases, and of having to repeat information both in writing and over the telephone.

Some respondents did, however, qualify their criticism of CSA by comparison with the performance they had been expecting, or indeed felt they had received from other parts of the Government. Families have to deal with various kinds of bureaucracy on a regular basis, concerning education, health, their income sources, and so on. To their minds, a degree of delay and the need for progress-chasing were only to be expected, even if ideally they would not have been necessary.

14.3.1 Need to keep things moving along

Many respondents explained that it had taken a while for calculation and payment/collection to be sorted out. Often they had to get in touch with the CSA to check on the progress of the case, and ensure it was moving along.

Where delays do occur, there is the possibility that arrears will accrue. Then the CSA’s task becomes one of recovering arrears, as well as enforcing orderly payment. It can also mean that the level of debt owed by some NRPs looks, to them, particularly large and therefore likely to cause stress. It is in the interests of all parties to avoid arrears building up at an early stage. It was not always possible for people to take action to prevent this. One NRP was concerned that he would be unable to keep a valid record of voluntary payments, since the PWC would only accept payment in
cash. He therefore asked if CSA could channel payments he made, but he was told this was not possible:

‘[I asked] ‘Can I pay you, and you pay her? Then you’ve got a record’.

[staff replied] ‘No, cannot do that yet because the assessment hasn’t been made’.’

(NRP, >40 years old)

14.3.2 A lack of teeth

There have been long-running criticisms of the CSA to the effect that they go after ‘easy targets’ – those in stable circumstances and who are already paying child support regularly – rather than pursuing the errant group who have never contributed toward their children’s upkeep.

Both PWCs and NRPs perceived that there was a hard core of people who were not compliant, indeed who were being deliberately obstructive or ‘playing the system’ in some way. Sometimes this could be the particular NRP of the PWC being interviewed. We heard about NRPs who were able to transfer assets or even incomes to new partners, or who were ‘working on the side’ for cash in hand that was not declared.

There was, in many cases, a good deal of scepticism about the effectiveness of the CSA in dealing with difficult groups. Most respondents perceived that the errant or wayward group, as they saw it, were the true target of child support legislation. But a target that had generally been missed, or over whom the CSA appeared unable to exercise authority:

‘...when the CSA were first set up several years ago it was going to be great. Fathers would walk in fear. It’s a big joke’

(PWC, >40 years old)

This perceived lack of CSA power could lead to a sense of disappointment among the minority who began their case with high hopes for the outcome.

At the same time, some PWCs had expected that their NRP would be troublesome, and had then been pleasantly surprised that the CSA had then been effective in producing a steady flow of maintenance from them.

14.3.3 Time spent on small amounts

Some of the criticisms made of the CSA applied with greater force where the outcome was perceived as disproportionate to the effort expended. In some cases, a two child family receiving Income Support became two lone parents, each with one child, also receiving Income Support. Then interviewees mentioned that they were both paying £5 a week and receiving £5 a week, which seemed (at least to them) a fairly meaningless transfer. At such a point some wondered if there were particular targets being pursued by CSA rather than effective changes to people’s circumstances.
However, it may be said in defence of such policies that establishing the potential for future higher amounts is best done as early as possible. And such a system may reinforce the obligations owed to children, even if amounts are low.

### 14.3.4 Face-to-face contact

There was frequent mention of the need for a face-to-face service to ‘get it sorted out’. In some cases this was a simple preference for personal contact rather than a call centre. For some it was a case of keeping things more locally, rather than having matters discussed at a somewhat remote site where people had unfamiliar accents. For a third group it related to the complexity of their circumstances, which were easier to set out in person rather than through correspondence of other types.

So a number of both PWCs and NRPs told us that they would prefer to talk to someone and explain their circumstances. Most of this group also felt it would help the CSA to make a fair calculation if they could see the living accommodation of the parents, and understand their outgoings.

Those who had met a face-to-face officer were happy enough with the service, although nothing particularly positive was mentioned. One NRP who was suffering from depression and felt the need for some support had repeatedly asked to meet a face-to-face officer, but had first been told that the service was not available, then told that it was available again. Despite it being available they never got an appointment. There were a few people who commented to us that the CSA wouldn’t dare offer a face-to-face interview because of the high levels of frustration these clients felt with the system. It is of course entirely possible that early intervention by a face-to-face officer may have prevented the frustration that clients verbalised:

‘Oh, I think I’d lose my temper, I really would.’

(PWC, aged 30-40)

### 14.3.5 Lack of visible case-worker and client’s past dealings

Somewhat related to the above point, there was some concern that no particular member of staff had taken personal responsibility for the respondent’s case. Instead, calls could end up with a different person each time, or it was not possible to contact the same person on subsequent occasions.

We have heard in the first part of this report about the difficulties staff have without access to a proper client record. Under the pre-reform system this could be dealt with using ‘Notepad’. In much of industry, indeed, there is a strong focus on Customer Relationship Management (CRM). This is a strategy used to learn more about customers’ needs, through tracking their behaviour and using this information to help tailor responses to them.

Without a strong or straightforward means of tracking cases, people may end up giving the same information repeatedly. The problem is magnified if, in difficult
cases, a different member of staff deals with different stages of the case. As one NRP said:

‘You try to get through to the same people, but nine times out of ten you’re repeating your story over and over again to somebody else.’

(NRP, >40 years old)

A PWC said, more simply, ‘you phone and no-one’s taking a note’. This kind of view was expressed by many of the people we spoke to. Probably what highlighted this problem was the time it was taking to make calculations and get money flowing. When people perceived it was taking a long time, they were more likely to get in touch to check on progress. It was then that any difficulties in obtaining a case-worker or other suitably informed person became apparent.
Appendix A
Staff interviews and focus groups

Background

The Child Support Agency (CSA) is divided into seven Business Units, including Northern Ireland. Each Business Unit has a number of satellite processing centres in towns across the region covered, in addition to the main office. Eastern Business Unit (EBU) is based in Belfast, in the same building as the Northern Ireland Business Unit (NIBU). The other main offices are in Falkirk, Birkenhead, Dudley, Plymouth and Hastings. The regions covered by these Business Units can be seen in Figure A.1. As can be seen, Falkirk office covers Northern England and the whole of Scotland.

Figure A.1 Business Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSAC</th>
<th>Business Unit area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belfast (GB)</td>
<td>Eastern Business Unit (dealing with cases where the PWC lives in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, East Anglia or East Midlands) is co-located within the headquarters of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency. It has local service offices in the East of England.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An initial, fact-finding visit was made to the central office, in Newcastle, to inform researchers about the working environment and the specialised terminology used in the offices. Researchers met staff of each grade from Administrative Officer (AO) to Higher Executive Officers (HEO), and had the opportunity to watch as calls were taken, and see the new computer system, CS2, in action. As a result of this visit minor changes were made to the topic guides to reflect the findings of this visit, before commencing with the interviews and focus groups.

**Recruiting participants**

Each Business Unit nominated a research co-ordinator to liaise with researchers and collate a list of volunteers from their Business Unit willing to participate in focus groups or depth interviews. The only criteria for participation was that they should have some CS2 experience (ie experience of the new computer system), and be available on certain dates. Research co-ordinators were told that in each Business Unit we needed up to eight AO volunteers for 1½ hour focus groups, one EO and one HEO for one hour depth interviews.

Recruitment was left to the research co-ordinators to organise, in a way they felt appropriate. Staff were primarily notified about the research through the CSA intranet, and volunteers were requested to provide their name and contact details, and to note if they worked on the National Helpline and whether they had experience of the new computer system, CS2. Where insufficient volunteers came forward the first time, the process was repeated.

Each research co-ordinator provided the complete list of volunteers, and participants were selected by the researchers without input from the co-ordinators. Selection was made based on grade only, with the intention of speaking to one EO, one HEO and up to eight AOs from each Business Unit.
Focus groups and interviews took place between 11 March and 6 April, 2004. Most were conducted within Business Units, but two focus groups and two depth interviews were held in nearby conference facilities. During this time there was significant disquiet over pay and conditions in several sections of the civil service, including industrial action in Belfast. The budget announcement of up to 40,000 jobs being cut within the Department for Work and Pensions came after interviews and focus groups had been completed in three of the seven Business Units.

All focus groups and depth interviews were facilitated by one or two researchers using topic guides. They were recorded, transcribed in full and analysed using thematic gridding techniques.

Focus groups with Administrative Officers.

In all, 83 AOs volunteered to participate in a focus group, most of whom had experience of the new computer system, CS2. The final sample selected was drawn from AO volunteers with CS2 experience, who could be available on a pre-determined day. We did not have detailed information about each volunteer before sampling.

A total of 18 male AOs and 23 female AOs were interviewed in seven focus groups. The participants did not all know each other. Additionally, one female AO was interviewed separately because of difficulty in recruiting sufficient AO volunteers in one Business Unit. For the purpose of this report her responses are collated with those from the other focus groups, to maintain confidentiality. Two focus groups were held in Belfast, because of the presence of the two Business Units. One focus group was made up of staff from the NIBU and the EBU, whilst the second was all EBU staff, as there were insufficient volunteers in NIBU, which has a much smaller staff. EBU has satellite processing centres on the mainland, and a focus group was therefore also arranged in Nottingham to allow staff from these offices to participate.

The focus group participants included staff from a variety of teams including those working on the National Helpline, ‘New Client’ teams and ‘Debt’ teams. It also included newly recruited staff with no experience of the old rules or the old computer system (CSCS), and long serving staff with over 10 years experience in the child support agency. Staff came from both main offices and satellite processing centres. The Newcastle focus group included staff working in England and Scotland.

Depth Interviews with Executive and Higher Executive Officers

Interviews were conducted with four male EOs, two female EOs, five male HEOs and one female HEO. These were drawn from the 15 EOs (or acting/temporary EOs), and eight HEOs (including acting HEOs) who had volunteered to take part. These interviews each lasted approximately one hour.
Appendix B
Clients

Depth interviews were conducted with clients in three of the seven Business Units, South West, Eastern and South East.

Recruiting participants

A sample was drawn of 600 clients from 36 postcode areas within three Business Units. All were clients with cases on the new rules. For each client, data was provided giving name, age, gender, type of claimant (PWC on benefits etc), number of children being supported and contact details. The contact details provided by the CSA included telephone numbers for 177 of the 600 clients in the sample. The vast majority of these were mobile phone numbers.

It was agreed that matching a Parent with Care (PWC) and Non-resident Parent (NRP) was both time consuming and unnecessary for this particular research. The clients drawn were therefore not linked; we only had contact details of either the PWC or the NRP relating to each case.

Table B.1  Numbers in sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PWC on benefits</th>
<th>PWC, Private</th>
<th>NRP on benefits</th>
<th>NRP, working</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>200</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>150</strong></td>
<td><strong>150</strong></td>
<td><strong>600</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All clients in the sample were sent a letter describing the research, and giving them the opportunity to opt out by letter or phone, within two weeks of receipt. Opt out was very low with only one calling to withdraw; five phoned to request an interview.
We believe that the low level of opt out was due in part to the fact that we had a number of out of date addresses – for example, six letters were returned to us by the post office as undeliverable. NRPs in particular seemed likely to have moved.

Following the two week opt out period clients were contacted in a variety of ways. Many were telephoned to arrange a convenient time to conduct the interview, and some chose to withdraw from the research at this point. Reasons given for withdrawal included lack of time, and frustration that we had acquired their telephone number from the CSA. In total, 34 interviews were achieved by contacting clients by telephone. Where telephone numbers were not available, two approaches were used. A second letter was delivered to some clients, often by hand, asking them to call the interviewer to arrange an appointment. Others were approached on their doorstep and asked if they were available for an interview.

Interviews were conducted between May and September, 2004. After reviewing the early interviews it was agreed that it would be appropriate to interview approximately equal numbers of each type of client. (That is 15 each of NRPs in work, NRPs not working, PWCs on benefits and ‘private’ PWCs). This quota was therefore adopted to complete the research. Additionally we agreed on a quota of approximately 20 clients from each of the three Business Units.

In all, 58 interviews were achieved with 20 clients from the South West Business Unit, 18 from the South East Business Unit and 20 from the Eastern Business Unit. Every client drawn from the South East was contacted, but the low initial draw was insufficient to hit the quota of 20, which highlights the difficulty in obtaining interviews with this group of people, both because of incorrect contact details and unwillingness to participate.

**Depth interviews**

Clients were asked to allow up to one hour for the interview. Most PWCs were met in their own home; rather more interviews with NRPs were conducted in public places, such as cafés. Caution was appropriate since a number of interviewees admitted to having been accused of violent behaviour and (at least) one had served time in prison for crimes of violence.

Interviewers followed a topic guide and interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed using thematic grids. In most instances the interview was completed in under an hour, particularly where client interaction with the CSA was minimal. All clients were offered a £20 gift voucher to thank them for participating.
References


