

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

WOMEN AND WELFARE INQUIRY

ANONYMOUS SUBMISSION

I am a single mother in work, but who relies on things such as housing benefit and tax credits to make ends meet. However I want to draw the Committee's attention to an issue which is separate (but related) to benefits, and which I find concerning.

The Westminster Government has announced changes to Child Support that is collected from a non-resident parent and given to a resident parent. The changes will mean that if parents have to use the Child Support Agency to administer the support - the non-resident will have to pay more, and the resident parent will be given less. It is essentially the introduction of a fee on the service and it is said to encourage parents to come to private agreements.

Going through divorce myself I can absolutely say that often when parents are not able to come to agreements, it is with good cause. My daughter's father has reported me for benefit fraud I was not committing, become aggressive - shouting, swearing and personally insulting me in Family Mediation, saying I was stupid and had a mental illness I had never been diagnosed with, then refusing all further offers of mediation, sent me aggressive communication about how wrong it is for me to claim Child Support or have Tax Credits and that he should have them, tried to discuss financial issues in front of my then four year-old daughter, and on the same occasion refused to leave my home when I asked him to. This is not the limit of his poor behaviour, but these are merely the behaviours that have occurred around financial matters. At the time he was earning around twice what I was, and was ordered to pay £25 a week.

Because of my experience I feel that this change essentially financially penalises those whose relationships have broken down and their children. While the idea of encouraging resolution between parents appears admirable, for many in difficult situations it will put more pressure and stress on them when they should be being supported to limit contact and personal reliance on an unreasonable and aggressive partner.

I am sure you can imagine the sort of stress and worry this would bring to people who are in even worse marital situations than I am, especially given that the person who has done the bulk of the childcare pre-separation often is at an extreme financial disadvantage after separation.

On top of this parents who share 50/50 custody will no longer be eligible for Child Support. While it appears as though that is fair as both parents are looking after the children equally, the cost of children is a much greater % of overall income to those who leave a marriage in poor financial circumstances. This means that a child can go from a parent's house who is relatively wealthy one part of the week, and then be with a parent who is in poverty and struggling to make ends meet the next part of the week. This does not provide a stable and equitable environment for children on the separation of their parents.

This also has the undertone of imagining that children are similar to marital assets, to be split up equally, with no thought for their environmental, physical or mental health - both parents should be supported to provide the best they can for their child, and retracting child support on the ground of 50/50 care does not do that.

At one point after an accident which required surgery, finding out I did not qualify for sick pay because I was too poor, and a truculent performance from the Employment Support Allowance staff, I had to consider using a food bank to feed me and my daughter, while her father was in a good enough financial position to take out a mortgage on a second property - given his previous behaviour I am too scared to ask him for any extra support as it will later be used against me.

Fortunately things have changed for me and are a lot better now. I however can't forget how awful the feeling I was going to have to use a food bank was and then realising that I may have to take my daughter with me, and wouldn't be able to hide the situation from her. While the change in Child Support may now be less impacting for me, I am utterly sure there are families out there for whom it will make an absolute difference in their lives.