

Constituency Casework Guide

Child maintenance

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Child Maintenance

Child maintenance is designed to be a regular and reliable source of financial support for many households with children and young people. Constituency offices may receive enquiries from constituents seeking information or advice on child maintenance payments and processes. The purpose of this constituency guide is to signpost MLAs and their constituency staff to useful sources of information. It includes information on the core bodies responsible for child maintenance; sourcing information and advice for constituents and employers; accessing child maintenance data; the appeals and complaints process; and sources of independent information and advice.

**Should MLAs or their constituency staff have suggestions for information they would like to see in the guide, or have links to useful sources that they would like to share, please feel free to contact the Research and Information Service at:
RLS@niassembly.gov.uk**

1 Child maintenance: What is it and who is responsible for it?

Child maintenance is a form of regular financial support provided to meet the everyday living costs of raising a child when parents are separated. It is for children who are (a) under the age of 16 or (b) under the age of 20 if they are still in full-time education not higher than A-level. The parent who does not have the day-to-day care (the 'paying parent') pays child maintenance to the other parent or another person who provides care (the 'receiving parent').

Separated parents can arrange child maintenance in a number of ways:

- [Privately through a family-based arrangement](#);
- [Through a Consent Order from a court](#); or
- [Through the Child Maintenance Service](#).

Some of the core bodies and services involved in child maintenance in Northern Ireland are set out in the box below. This includes Child Maintenance Service (CMS), Child Maintenance Choices and a NI Child Maintenance Outreach Service. Use the links to access further information including contact details.

Child maintenance in Northern Ireland – core bodies and services

- Child maintenance is the responsibility of the [Department for Communities](#) and is overseen by the [Child Maintenance Service](#) (Northern Ireland).
- Parents and caregivers can access information and advice from [Child Maintenance Choices](#) who may also put separated parents in contact with the Child Maintenance Service.
- A [NI Child Maintenance Outreach Service](#) is also available to:
 - promote awareness of the Child Maintenance Service;
 - improve relationships and communications with MLAs, MPs and stakeholder groups; and
 - improve services to clients and “ultimately get money to more children”.

*****MLAs, MPs and advisory groups may contact the Outreach Service at belfast.nioutreach@dfcni.gov.uk. Please note that this email address is only available to MLAs/MPs/advisory bodies and cannot respond to general customer queries.**

- The independent [Standards Committee](#) is tasked with monitoring and reporting on decision-making. Its annual report (2020/21) is available to download [here](#).

2 Sourcing information on child maintenance – where do I start?

A good place to start is the NI Direct website page '[Child maintenance: an introduction](#)'. This not only provides background information explaining the purpose of child maintenance but is a hub that provides links to other core NI Direct webpages on child maintenance including, for example:

- [Arranging child maintenance yourself](#);
- [Applying for child maintenance](#);
- [Calculating child maintenance](#);
- [How CMS calculates income](#);
- [CMS Six Steps to working out child maintenance payments](#);
- [Child maintenance rates explained](#);
- [How Annual Review works](#);
- [Child maintenance terms and meanings](#);
- [Manage your child maintenance case online](#);
- [CMS support for those experiencing domestic abuse or violence](#);
- [Dealing with relationship problems](#);
- [Child maintenance payments](#) (including information on payment methods and plans, payment problems etc);
- [Applying for a variation in payment](#);
- [How child maintenance affects benefits](#);
- [Disputed parentage](#);
- [Shared care in maintenance arrangements](#);
- [Paying parent income adjustments](#);
- [Changes CMS needs to know about](#);
- [What happens if you don't pay child maintenance?](#); and
- [What if I'm unhappy about the service received from CMS \(complaints process\)](#).

DfC Decision-Makers Guide

More detailed information on decision-making in relation to maintenance is available in the Department for Communities '[Decision-Makers Guide for Child Maintenance](#)'. This is more detailed and technical than the information provided on the NI Direct pages but may nevertheless be useful for constituency staff and independent advisors.

3 Where can I access data on child maintenance payments, arrears, enforcement etc?

Statistics on child maintenance can be accessed from the [Department for Communities](#) website. The latest published [data](#) available is to December 2021 (note these are experimental statistics).

There is also information and data published on the progress of the standard of decision-making within the Child Maintenance Service. The latest CMS Annual Report on Decision Making (April 2020 to March 2021) is available to [download here](#).

4 Where can my constituents access information?

Child Maintenance Choices

To apply for child maintenance through the Child Maintenance Service (CMS), constituents will first need to contact [Child Maintenance Choices](#). There are several ways to contact the service:

- Freephone 0800 028 7439 (Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm).
- Text: 67300 for a call back (text 'Choices').
- Email: cms_choices@nidirect.gov.uk
- For sign language users and for people with speech or hearing impairment see [here](#).

As outlined in the first section of the guide, the NI Direct website contains a variety of information on how the Child Maintenance System in Northern Ireland is designed to operate.

Problems with managing a case online?

People experiencing problems using this online service may contact 0800 232 1956 for assistance. Opening hours are Monday to Friday from 8am to 4pm. Contact details for sign language users and those with speech or hearing impairments is available [via this webpage](#).

Make the Call

The aim of the [Make the Call](#) service is to ensure individuals and households are receiving all the social security benefits and services they are entitled to. Make the Call can be contacted on 0800 232 1271 or visit the website [here](#).

5 Is there any information for employers?

Many employers in Northern Ireland are legally obligated to collect child maintenance from their employees. The [NIBUSINESSINFO.CO.UK](https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk) website includes a [guide for employers](#) on child maintenance which includes information on:

- Employers' legal obligations when deducting child maintenance from their employees;
- Deduction from Earnings Orders (DEOs);
- How to calculate deductions;
- What counts as earnings;
- Making DEO payments;
- Change of circumstances for DEOs; and
- The implications of not complying with DEO obligations.

6 Where can I find information on the appeals and complaints process?

Information on child maintenance appeals and complaints is available on the NI Direct website [here](#).

Appealing the decision on payment amounts

According to NI Direct, before a decision about child maintenance payment amounts can be appealed, constituents must contact the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) to ask for the decision to be looked at again. Should the constituent remain dissatisfied, they can make an appeal regarding a child maintenance decision about payment amounts to [The Appeals Service](#) (TAS (NI)). Constituents may also contact CMS if they are unhappy with the service they have received. The NI Direct website contains further information on the appeals process including links to the relevant [forms](#) that must be submitted. It also provides information on the types of decisions that cannot be appealed.

Complaining about the service received from the Child Maintenance Service (CMS)

If a constituent is unhappy with the service provided by CMS they can follow the complaints procedure outlined on the NI Direct website [here](#). If, having used the full complaint's process, a constituent still feels their complaint wasn't properly investigated they can ask the [Independent Case Examiner](#) or the [Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman](#) (NIPSO) to investigate the complaint. The NIPSO website outlines the process for making a complaint and links to the relevant forms that should be completed.

Note that the Department for Communities also has a [Customer Charter](#) for the delivery of its Work, Benefits and Maintenance Service.

7 Sources of independent information and advice

The Advice NI website provides an [interactive map](#) of local independent advice providers that may be able to provide additional advice and guidance on a range of issues including benefits and entitlements for families; tax credits; debt; and support services.

The [Family Support NI](#) website provides a wide variety of information and contacts for local services and support organisations. Its [YouTube](#) channel contains useful details about the family mediation process.

The [borderpeople website](#) also contains information on child maintenance north and south for cross-border workers and families. You can find further information on child maintenance arrangements in the Republic of Ireland [here](#).

This information is provided to MLAs in support of their Assembly duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual or organisation. Whilst we strive to ensure that the information provided here is up to date, the information on external websites referred to may change frequently. This leaflet should not be relied upon as providing legal or professional advice, nor as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

The Research and Information Service is available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

For more information, please use the following weblink or QR code: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/research-and-information-service-raise/>

