



women's

RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Supporting Women's Groups & Networks across Northern Ireland

Supporting separated families; securing children's futures

Consultation Response September 2012

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The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation whose mission is to 'to advance women's equality and participation in society by working to transform political, economic, social, and cultural conditions'. The organisation was established in 1983 and works with women's groups from all traditions in the most severely disadvantaged communities, and from urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland. We work from the grass roots to the highest levels of policymaking and politics, providing advocacy and lobbying support. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 400 members comprised of Women's Groups, Organisations, and individual members.

WRDA welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the draft regulations for the provision of child maintenance. As 95 percent of parents with care (PWC) are women, this is an issue that will impact on women and their children.

Relationships rarely end completely amicably and this leads to problems when arranging maintenance. The impact assessment carried out by DWP in relation to these proposals demonstrates that out of 1.4 million families outside of the statutory services nearly half of these have no arrangements for child maintenance. Out of 600,000 families with family arrangements, 1/6th of these are ineffective. Out of 100,000 with court arrangements, there are over a quarter of these that are ineffective. We would contend that these figures do not lead to confidence in a system designed to encourage voluntary maintenance payments. We are concerned that charging will effectively take money away from the children and at a time of increasing child poverty (particularly in lone parent families) this will disadvantage the children in broken relationships. There are two areas of this consultation that we are responding to; the domestic violence exemption and the seven percent level of charge.

The domestic violence exemption

WRDA are concerned that in order for an applicant to be exempt from the application fee on the grounds of domestic violence, they need to have previously reported an incident to specific individuals or agencies. Not all people who have experienced domestic violence will have reported it to these particular individuals/agencies. WRDA would recommend that this list be widened to include organisations such as community and voluntary organisations where women often feel more at ease to talk about their home situation.

The option of using Direct Pay without contact or divulging personal information could be successful for some. However, there is the concern that this would be used by the abusive partner as another form of control. If direct pay is not suitable,

women who have been impacted by domestic violence will still be required to pay the seven percent charge. WRDA would like to see this negated.

The seven percent level of charge

PWCs will have to pay £20 application fee if the non-resident parent (NRP) does not agree to pay maintenance with no guarantee of success. On top of this they will also be charged 7% of the amount they are awarded as an administration fee. Although this is less than the amount charged to the NRP, it is fundamentally unfair that if the NRP refuses to pay voluntarily that the parent with care will be penalised for the NRP's non-compliance. While these amounts appear to be small, for those lone parents on low incomes a few pounds each week can make a considerable difference to their budget.

Conclusion

WRDA are concerned that charging to provide a child maintenance service will adversely impact upon women and children. We feel that there is more concern with raising revenue than the welfare of children. For every £10 of maintenance, the child maintenance service will receive £2.70. This appears to be penalising children and parents with care if an effective, satisfactory voluntary arrangement cannot be reached. Financially penalising women and children in low income households is not desirable in our view.