



Transforming Child Maintenance

A fairer system for children and families

Test and Learn: Understanding the approach to child maintenance in Fife Evaluation Report

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September 2024

Citation: McHardy, F (2024) 'Test and Learn: Understanding the approach to Child maintenance in Fife - Evaluation Report'. The Poverty Alliance.

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Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank all those who gave their time to share their views for this work. Your contribution is appreciated. We would also like to acknowledge the guidance and support of the wider research partnership.

Terminology

We recognise that a wide range of terminology gets used in the field of Child maintenance to describe parents. Terms that can be used include parent with care, parents without care, resident parents and non-resident parents and receiving and paying parent for the parent who receives the child maintenance on behalf of the child(ren) or young person(s).

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	7
An overview of child maintenance in the UK.....	7
Reforming child maintenance.....	9
About the ‘test and learn’ approach	10
Evaluation approach	12
Learning from the evaluation	13
Support pathways for financial mitigation.....	13
Case Study: Bonnie.....	15
Targeted casework with families	17
Typology of cases and demographics engaging.....	17
Outreach and referral processes for case work.....	19
Sensitivity and complexity of cases.....	22
Resident parents’ perceptions of the value of the support..	22
Case study: Lucy.....	23
Navigation of the CMS.....	24
Understanding financial gain within the project.....	25
Case study: Julia	25
Training programme on child maintenance	27
Fife Women’s Aid: Case Study.....	29
Influencing and awareness activities	31
Other learning on child maintenance	32
Taking a trauma informed approach to child maintenance	35
Test and learn year one project recommendations	39
Test and learn year one wider system recommendations	42
Conclusions	43
Related Transforming Child Maintenance reports	46
References	47

1. Executive Summary

This report documents learning from an evaluation of a local ‘test and learn’ approach to supporting parents with child maintenance in Fife delivered by Fife Gingerbread. The delivery model involves providing one-to-one and tailored support intended to support families in Fife to establish and sustain child maintenance arrangements. The project has been funded by The Robertson Trust for three years. It is part of a wider project partnership between One Parent Families Scotland, Fife Gingerbread and the Institute of Public Policy Research, looking to achieve transformational change to the UK child maintenance system and to contribute to reducing child poverty.

Learning on year one of the child maintenance project in Fife was captured by the Poverty Alliance between August 2023 and June 2024.

The ‘test and learn’ approach

The child maintenance delivery model was introduced by Fife Gingerbread in July 2023, intended to support 30 families with challenges around child maintenance in Fife. The project is providing support to resident parents through a Child Maintenance Coordinator role based at Fife Gingerbread. There are four core project streams:

1. Supporting pathways for financial mitigation.
2. Targeted casework with families.
3. Training programme development.
4. Influencing and awareness raising activities.

The evaluation of year one of the project has sought to provide learning on the project delivery and impacts on families alongside insights on issues within the current UK child maintenance system.

Within Scotland, there is currently no one bespoke service that provides tailored and local level support to families for child maintenance and so the ‘test and learn’ project developed in Fife and therefore this initial evaluation provides critical learning for policy makers and civil servants as well as organisations who have a role in supporting families on a new approach to supporting child maintenance.

Key findings

Supporting pathways for financial mitigation

- Advice and support provided to parents through the project led to financial gains of Child Maintenance payments of £22,500 for families and children. The project and the Child Maintenance Coordinator developed new recording approaches to fully understand the financial gain for service users
- Providing funding to mitigate the 4% charges to resident parents with collect and pay arrangements was faced with external practical challenges during year one including compliance issues delaying collect and pay arrangements being set up by the Child Maintenance Service. One resident parent received this funding in year one.

Targeted casework with families

- The evaluation found that parents valued the continuity of support from one support worker and that families were supported to engage in a way that balanced and centred their needs including through home visits.
- Having a dedicated Child Maintenance Coordinator provided the resource to be able to support more complex cases over a longer period. The 'in house' approach was perceived by staff to be beneficial in engaging families who had mistrust of services or, due to confidence or previous trauma, parents who found it difficult to meet new practitioners or share their experiences.
- An important factor in the engagement of families was the coordinator already being known to local families. Trust and familiarity with the Fife Gingerbread service was central to this.

Training programme development

- A training programme, 'Confident Conversations', was completed by 73 practitioners and the evaluation highlighted positive impacts on understandings of the child maintenance system as well as on how to use a children's rights framing approach to have conversations with parents about child maintenance.

Influencing and raising awareness

- The evaluation has added to the existing evidence base on the range of issues with the child maintenance system. This stream of work has focused on providing timely feedback to MPs and other professionals on flaws within the system affecting families.

As the project goes into its second year, the evaluation highlights key reflections and learning points for ongoing delivery including issues to consider with scaling up of the project such as resource availability and support for the Child Maintenance Coordinator and reaching/engaging families with differing protected characteristics.

Building on evidence from recent research on the child maintenance system, this evaluation also identified a range of system issues particularly for more complex cases. Issues including a lack of consideration and support around domestic violence in the child maintenance system and lack of support for parents to go to tribunal, continue to prevent parents and children accessing their rights to child maintenance.

Recommendations

This project demonstrates a critical need for transformational change of the existing child maintenance system and provides evidence to support the scaling up of local level support on child maintenance across Scotland to help support families to establish and maintain child maintenance arrangements and provide better outcomes for children.

Introduction

This project evaluation provides an overview of the learning and changes implemented across different components of the project and recommendations to the local service delivery alongside the wider operational approach of the Child Maintenance Service (CMS).

This independently funded project, funded by The Robertson Trust, forms part of a larger change project working with One Parent Families Scotland, the Institute of Public Policy Research and Fife Gingerbread. The evaluation was conducted by the Poverty Alliance between August 2023 and May 2024.

Before sharing the learning from the evaluation, this report first provides an overview of the child maintenance system in the UK and recent reforms.

The aims of this evaluation were to provide:

- Understand how families can be supported to have more effective experiences of child maintenance within Fife through targeted case work delivered through the Test and Learn approach
- Understand the implementation of a trauma informed approach to Child Maintenance.
- Understand the development and implementation of support pathways for financial mitigation of Child Maintenance charging.
- Explore the development and delivery of training and integration of child maintenance within targeted services within the Test and Learn phase.
- Provide insights from the learning and wider 'Influencing' focus within the Test and Learn project.

An overview of child maintenance in the UK

Against a backdrop of challenging economic circumstances for many households across Scotland and the UK, the importance of ensuring stable and adequate support for families has never been more vital to support children and families to have successful positive outcomes.

Following the COVID 19 pandemic, there has been multiple challenges to living standards across the UK with falling and stagnating real incomes across the project term¹. Alongside this there continues to be wider income pressures on families, in particular families on a low income with evidence showing that one in four people in working single parent families are in poverty². Of however, the six priority family groups within in Scottish child poverty frameworks , lone parents are the least likely to be employed due to a number of barriers³. Alongside this, children within single parent households have a higher risk of being in relative poverty in comparison to other children.

This context looks likely to be a continually challenging one for families and an economic backdrop where the role of child maintenance to support children's needs will continue to be vital.

Child maintenance refers to a payment approach between parents to support a child or young person's upbringing. In legislative terms this is enshrined in law with:

Duty to maintain: Section 1 of the 1991 Act states, "each parent of the qualifying child is responsible for maintaining [them]" and "where a maintenance calculation made under this Act requires the making of periodical payments, it shall be the duty of the non-resident parent with respect to whom the calculation was made to make those payments 4."

Across the UK, the policy landscape in recent years on child maintenance has been subject to analysis and numerous reforms. As a policy area, child maintenance remains a complex and contested area of social policy shaped by both the private (within households) and the public sphere such as wider political and economic contexts. The complexity of this landscape requires the administrative approach and implementation of the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) to support better outcomes for families. The service requires to support families across diverse circumstances, from those where the non-resident parent is now living abroad to households where there has been domestic abuse. Policy makers must continue to recognize and centre the vital role that child maintenance can play for the outcomes and rights of children and young people across the UK.

More generally, previous evidence has indicated the fragility of family-based arrangements during periods of income challenges such as the current cost of living context⁵.

¹ These were structured reflective journal documents designed to explore project activities and core learning on the project including scope, barriers and enablers of change and tacit and implicit learning and context of the Child Maintenance Coordinator's work and the wider project operational and delivery approach.

² Bespoke training program providing an introduction to Child Maintenance for service providers working with families.

³ Not real name

⁴ Duty desk referrals did not complete monitoring forms and are excluded from the analysis above.

⁵ Not real name

Reforming child maintenance

A significant number of reforms have taken place in the implementation of the CMS. Within the UK, primary child maintenance legislation is reserved and devolved only in Northern Ireland which typically maintains and mirrors the primary legislation⁶.

The current Child Maintenance Service (CMS) replaced the old Child Support Agency; a much maligned and failing system, best illustrated by arrears within the system. Growing arrears lead to a write-off approach by the UK Government in 2018, which saw in £3.7 billion of child maintenance arrears being written off⁷.

The CMS was introduced in 2012 to replace the Child Support Agency, and this service aimed to resolve previous scheme problems, maximize the number of children benefiting from child maintenance arrangements, and reduce government spending on administering child support⁸.

Within the last few years, there have been several reforms and reviews made to the CMS recognising the increasing demands and criticism it has faced. Significant examples have included the Independent Review of the Child Maintenance Service response to Domestic Abuse 2023⁹ which led to the Child Support Collection Domestic Abuse Bill in June 2023 as well as the Child Support Enforcement Act 2023.

Currently within the CMS, the delivery model focuses on an online and telephone-based system for those who are required to use the CMS. The system is demand led¹⁰ meaning that parents who require it must apply for support with child maintenance through using the service.

At the time of publishing this evaluation, a new consultation has been launched on proposed wider changes to the CMS including new fee structure and support structures¹¹.

About the 'test and learn' approach

Currently, the ethos and preferred approach with the UK-wide CMS is for families to develop their own private or family-based arrangements and use the service only where required. The new child maintenance project at Fife Gingerbread was developed in recognition of the need for specialist support to ensure children are receiving the child maintenance they are entitled to.

Since the project inception, within Fife Gingerbread, a new Child Maintenance Coordinator (CMC) role has been developing operational and strategic infrastructure to support the delivery of a local level approach to child maintenance. This approach has focused both internally within the existing Fife Gingerbread delivery model and through wider collaboration with other third sector organizations in Fife to support a 'test and learn' approach focused on providing effective child maintenance support to families. This test and learn model has been designed to work within the existing 'status quo' context of the wider UK operational model delivered by the CMS.

Through this test and learn period, work led by a CMC within Fife Gingerbread has focused on the following workstreams:

I. Support pathways for Financial Mitigation

- Establishing pathways of support, and transfer mechanisms for financial support to mitigate charging structures within the CMS.

II. Targeted casework with families

- Centred around income maximisation to enable resident lone parents to successfully claim child maintenance.
- Outreach and promotional work for families and local support organizations.
- Supported casework with a diverse range of households requiring assistance with child maintenance concerns.
- Creating monitoring and reporting processes for learning and reviewing within the project.

III. Training program development

- Developing and delivering a training program to be delivered to front line practitioners utilizing child's rights framing, supporting more effective conversations on child maintenance locally. Ensuring that child maintenance is a key feature of all income maximisation conversations with lone parent families.

IV. Influencing and awareness activities

- Supporting wider influencing activities to raise awareness of the structural barriers surrounding child maintenance such as local parliamentary liaison.

Recognising the unique model of this approach to child maintenance within the UK, the role of the coordinator has required agility in supporting the project to adapt and build upon local opportunities and strategic priorities to help embed and take forward a local model of support. The project has provided a 'one stop shop' for families within the Fife locality to receive a trauma-informed approach to child maintenance.

Within Scotland, for separating families there are a range of parenting programmes that are delivered through local authorities and online resources¹². The 'test and learn' project has supported signposting to these resources for families who are able to establish a family-based arrangement. This has been delivered alongside support for families in more complex circumstances to enable them to establish and sustain arrangements or challenge ineffective arrangements for those who are unable to use family-based arrangements and require intervention from the CMS.

Evidence from the test and learn project to date has demonstrated that it has been successful in creating an additional local tier of support to the statutory CMS. Demand and need for the support continues to grow and will likely increase based upon the project 'bedding in' further within Fife.

Whilst small scale, the test and project has provided key insights into local need as well as wider systems change across the CMS as a whole. The next section will go onto explore key learning from evaluation of the four workstreams.

Evaluation approach

This evaluation was led by the Poverty Alliance. During project evaluation, a variety of methods were utilized to create a framework to actively capture real-time learning and reflections and to provide learning situated across different perspectives and contexts.

Evaluation activities were developed to capture real time learning and insights from across the different strands of work contextualised and underpinned by previous research on child maintenance within the Fife locality as well as wider project objectives.

The evaluation gathered evidence and learning from the following sources:

- Six targeted one to one interviews with resident parent families receiving support from the Child Maintenance Coordinator structured across households and types of child maintenance scenarios drawn from the wider case load of sixty seven.
- A monthly programme of reflective learning logs^a completed by the Child Maintenance Coordinator to systematically document insights and observations. This included individual learning and development as well as wider project development and learning.
- Review of evaluations collected from training sessions, as well as in person observation from a session delivered within a local support service Fife Rape and Sexual Assault Centre.
- Conducting a case study interview with a key referral service to gather in-depth information on the outreach work, referral support and outcomes from the partnership.
- Focus group conducted with five internal staff at Fife Gingerbread to obtain perspectives on the 'in house' experience of the project.
- Wider scheduling regular check-ins with CMC to facilitate ongoing communication and support and review learning logs.
- Attendance by evaluator at wider political engagement by the Child Maintenance Coordinator with local MPs highlighting project learning.
- Copies of key documentation, such as financial gain information and freedom of information requests requested by the Child Maintenance Coordinator such as CMS advisor guidance shared with the evaluator.

^{a)} These were structured reflective journals designed to explore core activities and learning on the project.

Learning from the evaluation

Support pathways for financial mitigation

When the test and learn project commenced, resident lone parents accessing the CMS were expected to pay a £20 application fee to the system. Previous research, within the Fife area in 2013, had indicated that the charges had impacted on families within the system and, in some cases, had prevented families from pursuing their child maintenance case with the CMS. Families had cited that the charge was prohibitive for those on a low income and was a barrier to families who perceived there was a risk they may be unsuccessful in receiving payments¹³. Wider evidence had also highlighted the negative consequences of this within the CMS alongside wider charging structures in terms of financial loss¹⁴.

Within the project, work was undertaken to pilot an approach to removing this application charge for parents within the Fife locality. The Child Maintenance Coordinator alerted parents to this through the targeted case work as well as through an outreach and the 'Confident Conversation'^b training programme delivered across the Fife locality. Mitigation of the charge was offered until the ceasing of charging across the UK due to reforms implemented on 26th February 2024.

During the project, funding to mitigate the fee was issued to five families on the CMC's caseload. Reasons for the reach of this in practice were cited as follows:

- Parent already having an active case(s) already with the CMS.
- The CMC being able to support parents to access a waiver directly through the due to parent being under 19 or having experienced domestic abuse.
- Parent being supported to another approach such as family-based arrangement otherwise known as a private arrangement.

In the caseload overall that was supported by the CMC, 36% of cases supported involved domestic abuse, resulting in fees being automatically waived within the child maintenance system.

Alongside the application fee funding, resources were also allocated to pilot mitigation of the charging within collect and pay arrangements. Within the current¹⁵ CMS, there are two main tiers of support from which families can be directed: direct pay and collect and pay, illustrated in the table below.

^{b)} These were structured reflective journals designed to explore core activities and learning on the project.

Level of support from the CMS	Details of approach
Direct pay	CMS makes the calculation on the maintenance amount. The paying parent makes payments directly to the receiving parent.
Collect and pay	<p>The CMS collects and passes on child maintenance payments which includes fees for the receiving parent and the paying parent.</p> <p>Fees include 20% (which is added to the payment) for paying parents and 4% (which is taken off the payment) for receiving parents</p>

Charging within collect and pay on resident parents amounts to 4% of their child maintenance for the usage of the service. This reduces the maintenance amount reaching household incomes. The collect and pay service is a second tier within the CMS. Cases placed on collect and pay were experiencing more complex circumstances; for example, where there are ongoing issues of non-compliance or where parents are survivors of domestic abuse.

Recent reforms to collect and pay are being implemented under a change introduced by the Child Support (Domestic Abuse) Act 2023; an amendment of existing legislation to allow for a child maintenance case to be placed onto the collect and pay service (where the CMS collects and passes on payments) if the case involves domestic abuse and one of the parents requests it¹⁶. At present this requires sub legislation in the UK Parliament to allow it to be implemented in full¹⁷.

Through the test and learn project, there was an opportunity to understand, at small scale, the impacts and implications of removing collect and pay charges on households. Funding was allocated with the intention to support this.

To support this pilot approach, the coordinator carried out scoping work with the local Citizens Advice Bureau to understand the best way to distribute funds to intended recipients without having any unintended negative consequences for the household. This work explored how removing the charge on resident parents would interact with any wider financial risks that families may encounter such as welfare conditionality and loss of income or entitlements that some households may face as result of any additional income¹⁸. Internal mechanisms were created and supported by a wider administration team within Fife Gingerbread to support administration and monitoring of the funds to parents.

During the pilot of this process, one family was supported with mitigation. Across the coordinator's case load, there were practical challenges encountered that prevented funding from being issued more widely. Three key issues were identified:

1. Case disputes within the collect and pay tier of service within the CMS. This was where cases had moved from this tier onto direct pay arrangements.
2. Compliance issues where payments due to be issued to resident parents through collect and pay had not been received.
3. Time constraints within the delivery period of the project and it being in its first operational year also impacted. Complex cases were time consuming, and administrative processes within the CMS resulted in limitations in what could be achieved in payments of child maintenance.

In practice, across the evaluation period of this project, there was one case of a family with one child who received in total £117 in mitigation of charges over the course of a year, which otherwise would have been lost income for their child's needs. Below is an account of the case supported by the CMC.

Case Study: Bonnie^c

Bonnie, a resident parent, was working part time, a student and had a child aged 2. After failing to receive any child maintenance since the birth of her child, she applied to the CMS. Bonnie described how the lack of maintenance had resulted in her accruing debt in supporting her child needs. She contacted and paid the application fee to the CMS following advice from a family friend. Initial payments were incorrect and paid on incorrect employment details of the non-resident parent. This was then corrected over a period following a mandatory reconsideration. Issues with compliance in the case saw money being withheld despite including issues with employer compliance. A lack of money to support her child had left Bonnie facing a lot of challenges in income including supporting the specialist dietary requirements of her child.

Bonnie describes the challenges she has faced when trying to navigate a complex case with multiple phone calls to the CMS.

^c Not real name

“It’s been a nightmare. It’s been a really, hard experience. I’ve I think I’ve spent well over like 30-40 hours on the phone to them because they take an hour to answer... going through security for about 10 minutes. Yeah. And then sitting for the extra 50, waiting for them to answer, just for them to say. Or you need to speak to a case worker. They tried to put you in a different line. It’s a non-existent line, so it eventually hangs itself up and you’re like, what have I just wasted my time for? I had to do that like every month”.

Upon engaging with the CMC, Bonnie was supported with her case eventually resulting in regular collect and pay payments being received. As a result of the mitigation funding, her child was entitled to an additional £16 a month which would have been deducted from her child maintenance. This support assisted Bonnie with her child’s specialist dietary needs.

Overall, the project required more cases meeting the criteria were to evaluate and further learn from the approach of mitigation of collect and pay fees and application fee charging. The demographics engaging in the project has prevented the opportunity to fully allocate the mitigation funding which has limited the evaluation learning that can be drawn from this. From the evaluation case work interviews conducted as part of this evaluation, initial evidence from the first recipient suggests this has highlighted positive benefits for their child’s outcomes from those who were recipient of the support, but wider evaluation is required to understand this at scale across a wider cohort of recipients.

Targeted casework with families

A core component of the test and learn approach has been to offer an additional advice tier within the Fife locality for resident parents.

This has resulted in a model which is unique in the UK in terms of offering an in-person approach on child maintenance. The wider CMS within the UK offers a telephone and online 'digital portal' approach to its service delivery.

Typology of cases and demographics engaging

Within the caseload of the project, active cases can be categorised into three typologies described as primary, intermediate and secondary/complex.

Primary	Simple signposting requiring only basic level information where the parent can take forward their needs in relation to child maintenance; for example, establishing a family-based arrangement. This also includes duty desk referrals where only low levels of support are required ^d .
Intermediate	Cases requiring limited or short-term support or guidance requiring making an application or resolving a concern where there had been minor changes of circumstances or a new partner.
Complex	Cases where there are specific and long-term support needs, for example, in cases of domestic abuse and coercive control. Cases with significant arrears or cases being moved from different tiers of the CMS service i.e. from direct pay to collect and pay.

^d) Duty desk referrals did not complete monitoring forms and are excluded from the analysis below.

Demographic Information on the presenting caseload drawn from for this evaluation has highlighted¹⁹:

- The majority of those engaged were aged 30-34 (n10) and 35-39 (n13) with 16-24 (n5), 25-29 (n9), 40-44 (n7) 45-49 (n5) of other reported cases.
- In relation to ethnic origin, the caseload engaged was White Scottish (n44), White English (n2) and White European (n2), and Chinese (n1) families.
- In reporting of health conditions or disability expected in the last 12 months or more, five within the caseload reported a mental health problem.
- Sex categories: female (n44) and male (n5).
- Sexual orientation: heterosexual (n48) and bisexual (n1).
- In terms of child priority family groups in Scotland, lone parents made up a high number of the caseload (n49) and the caseload also included young mothers under 25-years-old (n5), large families (with three or more children (n6) and families with a disabled adult or child (n2).
- Household status included never married or in a civil partnership (n32), separated (n9), married (n3) and divorced (n5).
- Other reported characteristics include in part-time work (n16), employed full time (n5), in further or higher education (n4) unemployed and seeking work (n13) and looking after family (n13).

The analysis of caseload data found a higher proportion of families who have never been married or in a civil partnership (n32) or are currently separated (n9) than other groups. Most of the engaging caseload so far have been female (n44). Wider patterns of gender inequality and child maintenance show a relationship with number of lone parent households headed by women and therefore engagement with the child maintenance system does not start from a gender-neutral position²⁰. More generally data from the CMS indicates that 93% of parents paying maintenance through the CMS are men²¹. More generally, in terms of single parent households, 90% of single (resident) parents are headed by women²².

The project requires further analysis in terms of recognition and approach to recording on protected characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability and so on. This may require wider scoping work to understand and support across intersections of characteristics such as LGBT populations or ethnic minority populations of which there was little engagement with the project.

Outreach and referral processes for case work

Referrals managed by the CMC role at Fife Gingerbread have occurred via:

- Internal referrals from frontline staff at Fife Gingerbread who are engaging families across support services or from the coordinator attending their family learning and group activities.
- External referrals through a process of wider outreach and signposting with key agencies such as Fife Women's Aid and Fife Rape and Sexual Assault Centre²³.
- Self-referral from word of mouth or another route.

Outside of the internal referrals coming from within Fife Gingerbread, there were organisation referral routes tested including through wider drop in approach and self-referral. Whilst there was some self-referral within the project, external referrals were more significant. Approaches such as drop-ins within local services like Fife Women's Aid were piloted to create different 'touch points' where the project could engage with vulnerable eligible families. Such approaches were recognised as being helpful in terms of promoting the project across a range of settings. More generally, the CMC delivered wider promotional presentations at Fife Gingerbread's Annual Event, networking forums and partner organisations team meetings.

As would be anticipated within a test and learn project of this nature, it has been difficult to fully predict the emerging case needs of the engaging families. As a unique project of its type without any comparators across the UK, the project has had to carefully balance its promotional and outreach activity across different phases to ensure an appropriate level of scale which maintains a focus on quality of support and advice.

It was recognised early in the project by the coordinator that the project was attracting multiple intermediate to complex cases. The coordinator perceived that this was likely driven by referral agencies with more complex cases being more likely to be refer on to the 'Test and Learn' project by wider projects where they lack the specialist knowledge, competencies or infrastructure to provide advice and support on child maintenance once cases encountered specific challenges i.e. challenges with compliance or enforcement of payments.

To support wider change within Fife Gingerbread, new processes were identified to create better data and evidence gathering aligned across family support projects to create better linkages and opportunities for supporting conversations on child maintenance. This included:

- Every new parent accessing Fife Gingerbread support being asked, using rights-based framing, about child maintenance needs within their household at the point of referral.
- Staff upskilled internally to help build understanding and embed the project across the organisation. This included 'Confident Conversations' training sessions held across support teams to promote internal referrals.

The 'in house' approach was perceived by Fife Gingerbread staff to be beneficial with engaging families who had mistrust of services or due to confidence or previous trauma found it difficult to meet new practitioners or share their experiences. Being able to offer a more personable and phased introduction approach was argued to better serve the needs of families.

"More cautious about meeting new people and a lot of them have been through domestic abuse, so they are quite guarded... They do need that extra reassurance because they can trust me. Some of them are happy to just chat over the phone. It depends for on their journey. I think the CMC is brilliant at taking that into consideration and always letting them and decide what's best for them".
(Staff interview within Fife Gingerbread)

Parents' views aligned with this practitioner. It was perceived across interviews that having a central person to support and engage with helped cut down on the complexity that families were often experiencing more widely either due to lack of knowledge of their rights or due to issues such as stigma.

"A lot of people, it's like the stigma. Yeah, there. I feel like. I don't know if that's the right word, but. They don't want to get other people involved in their situations, but. For me personally, it's been a great help. ...Especially like when you are stressed and everyone's coming at you at one time So having that the person there just to explain things to you, or if you get a letter in saying that you have been awarded that in the letters using all the big words and stuff. they'll explain it".
(Interview with supported parent)

More widely parents within this evaluation highlighted the importance of a neutral private space to discuss experiences particularly where they had experienced high levels of conflict with child maintenance arrangements or other issues such as domestic abuse.

In terms of the wider limitations, Fife Gingerbread practitioners highlighted the importance of understanding the limited capacity of the CMC and shared that clear communication between the coordinator and the referring internal staff to ensure case load was deliverable was vital. This 'throughway communication' internally was perceived as important to ensure referral processes and expectations were transparent, recognising the relational nature of support work.

Positive outcomes for families were reported; for example, achieving sustainable arrangements helped reinforce a positive message of engagement with Fife Gingerbread as well as their wider ethos of supporting families to have good holistic outcomes. The role of the coordinator was seen as a vital learning resource for the organisation as well providing space to take 'soft' queries.

It was clear that internally, the project has provided a vital mechanism for adding to the wider portfolio of support Fife Gingerbread provides. The test and learn approach aligns with the needs of presenting families. The person-centred 'internal offer' served as a useful approach to families who were reluctant to engage with child maintenance prior to the project.

In interviews, parents' suggestions were provided on framing for outreach and promotion of the project. Families spoke of misconceptions of child maintenance that had been served as barrier for families considering child maintenance. This included misconceptions being unaware of the legal right to child maintenance applying where parents were unmarried and legal rights around child maintenance and child contact. Wider trusted contacts such as health visitors and other home visiting services, in regular contact with families, were also recognised as key source of information and a person who could highlight rights around this area to promote child maintenance as an important income maximisation lever for families.

Key learning for further project development:

- More detailed data pathways sharing on child maintenance with key referral partners may assist with predicting and allocating resources. Wider data gathering and intelligence on system issues and solutions would also support further development of the project as it increases in scale.
- Evaluation evidence gathered internally at Fife Gingerbread indicated that having an 'in house' option for a model to access support for parents was hugely valuable. Workers recognised the expertise of the coordinator in being known to the staff and potential engaging families. They also highlighted the supportive pathway and communication channels this offered families. Central to this was the trust of the broader Fife Gingerbread 'brand and service' enabling parents to experience familiarity and continuity within the support offer. The co-location of the 'in house child maintenance' project also allowed for a more effective delivery experience through shared data bases and within permission constraints, which allowed for greater continuity with support needs and in turn the family experience.

- The project could consider more broadly wider touch points were the projected could be included and create wider opportunities for engaging with families. More generally the project could consider if there could be wider pathways, linkages with statutory services such as health visiting and more generally in co located advice services such as community links workers.

Sensitivity and complexity of cases

Within the presenting caseload, it has been clear the project has worked with a considerable number of cases whereby there has been ongoing or previous gender-based violence. Wellbeing and risk assessment will continue to be a need within the project as it is upscaled. The approach of the project in adopting trauma informed practice is critical, recognizing the risks of re-traumatization of families. Evidence emerged of the trauma people have experienced whilst engaging with the CMS itself as well as the adverse experiences such as economic abuse being prolonged by the operational and administrative approach it delivers.

Of note is the need for ongoing specialist training and trauma informed support and supervision for the role of the CMC in responding to cases to reduce the risks of vicarious trauma and support effective safeguarding and risk management with individual cases. More generally there is a need for wider learning in best practice in this area and partnership collaborating with specialist agencies.

Cases falling within the parameters of intermediate or complex required significantly more time invested by the coordinator. Internally within Fife Gingerbread this was supported by the creation of the additional resource and staffing of internal administrative support and processes to support review checks on less intensive cases and increase capacity within the project and of the CMC.

Key learning for further project development:

- A review of the infrastructure of the project and an assessment of the support structures needs to be built into regular review process to ensure support can be provided in a consistent and sustainable level.

Resident parents' perceptions of the value of the support

In terms of understanding the value of the project to the households engaged, evidence has indicated that the project has provided a key 'lifeline' in terms of supporting both an advocacy and advice role around child maintenance and in engaging with the CMS. Households engaged in the study have provided evidence on the competing pressures they were often dealing with in their lives and the importance of continuity of support provided through the CMC in allowing the prioritization of child maintenance against other life issues as well as hidden issues such as stigma.

Families spoke of anxiety and confusion about how to navigate conversations or how to begin them. Having the support of the coordinator helped provide a neutral audience and a safe space to consider what might be effective approaches and the next best steps.

“I get really like nervous about asking such a touchy subject with anybody, no matter their circumstances, if they’re employed or not, or what like. I just. I hate talking about money, and probably because I don’t have it. That’s why it’s like, it’s almost like an embarrassment”. **(Parent Interview with supported parent)**

The role of the CMC when navigating situations with complex scenarios was particularly of value; for example, in cases of a highly personal nature such as disputed paternity or where there was confusion or uncertainty on the non-resident parent’s circumstances (such as current employment status).

Timing of the support was critical. One strength of the project was the operational approach of in person support including home visits. Supporting families to engage in a way that balanced and centred their needs including where there was ongoing conflict between separated parents, caring responsibilities including supporting children with additional support needs, trauma including domestic abuse, living on a low income as well as experiencing physical or mental health conditions.

Case study: Lucy^e

Lucy, a single parent, lives with two children. She accessed the project support due to challenges with the non-resident parent paying the correct amount for the oldest child. The oldest child has additional support needs and requires specialist products to support incontinence due to their needs developmentally. Lucy had faced a challenging experience accessing child maintenance from the non-resident parent. This had included disputed paternity and financial and emotional abuse and harassment from the non-resident parent.

The non-resident parent had communicated incorrect information about the system and had mis-led Lucy on the correct entitlement for their oldest child. Alongside this, Lucy is coordinating balancing multiple needs within the household in terms of caring requirements as well as supporting her own wellbeing. Through the support of the Child Maintenance Coordinator, Lucy had been able to receive practical support and advice and access child maintenance. Currently, the coordinator is supporting Lucy for this to be escalated to a collect and pay process.

^eNot real name

Navigation of the CMS

A clear message emerged about the support of the project assisting the prioritization of child maintenance for families. For some, this was particularly critical when they were recently post-partum, or children were young and had fast changing needs. Without the support offered by the service, it was clear that some would not have pursued arrangements or would have been at risk of leaving the CMS system without support.

More generally, interviews with parents highlighted a hierarchy of needs they were often navigating in their daily lives and the need for advice and support that was delivered in an accessible and consistent way. Wider evidence from Save the Children and Between the Lines highlights single parents, in particular, experience challenges from the strains of carrying the sole responsibility for childcare, housework, and finances²⁴.

Parents reported frustrations with speaking to multiple advisors and retelling of their story through the CMS. This again echoes previous research within Fife on Child maintenance²⁵. Evidence supplied to the House of Commons enquiry also highlighted this as a core frustration families faced when engaging the with CMS²⁶.

As one parent described:

“I was on the phone at least twice a week trying to get an update cause even on the portal there was no updates, nothing.... I only found out because I got a text message letting me know that my collect and pay had been rejected. Didn't tell me why I had to phone them to find out why. It was rejected. I've had no letters, nothing”. **(Parent interview with supported parent)**

Navigating child maintenance was viewed across both stakeholder evidence and supported parent's voices as critical to achieve the financial gain and improve the lives of children and young people. Whilst there were some points raised on adequacy of amounts, this was predominantly related to calculations for basic level contributions or the flat rate. Knowledge of rights and supports in relation to the different pathways within the CMS pay and collect and direct pay assisted families with building their understanding of the system, including an understanding of the powers available to advisors within the CMS.

“The Child Maintenance Coordinator is making me understand that there are different ways of dealing with there's different paths you can take knowing the right terms to use and everything like that”. **(Parent interview with supported parent)**

Parents highlighted that the project and coordinator role had provided them with additional impetus to 'continue' with complex cases. This had a wider preventative role in terms of stopping parents giving up on cases or exiting the service.

Income gained and financial stability for children's everyday needs was perceived by resident households in the project as the most significant benefit to engaging with the project. This was particularly mentioned by parents of children who had a disability or health condition.

The project provided an important buffer to parents who had long term engagements with the CMS continuing their case and preventing an exit from the service. The importance of the support for single parent families who faced multiple competing responsibilities within households was also highlighted.

Understanding financial gain within the project

Evidence collated within the project on financial gain has required a new model of recording. Traditionally, within recording systems, financial gain can be estimated based on expected income such as social security payments, and this is usually predicted to be fixed for a specific period. Within child maintenance payment processes, due to the contested calculations, delays in payments and other system challenges, review processes such as special variations^f etc. financial gain needs to be recorded in terms of 'anticipated' and 'actual gain.' In terms of actual reported financial gain in the project from July 2023 to May 2024, £22,500 for children in families across Fife has been accrued. Julia's case study below highlights the financial impacts for her and her family of the support she received through the project.

The project developed its own recording procedures to record both anticipated and projected gain as well as actual gain allow detailed documentation on compliance in practice.

Case study: Julia^g

Julia has two children and had previously established a family-based arrangement. This had broken down and Julia had been unable to re-establish this. She then accessed the project to get support with accessing a new arrangement. The support of the Child Maintenance Coordinator allowed Julia to establish a new arrangement via direct pay which allowed her to gain a regular payment for her children. This provided much needed support to meet her children's needs including the costs of clothing.

^f Special Variations Refer to adjustments in child maintenance payments.

^g Not real name

The project has achieved significant financial gains for some of the families it has supported, but this has not been achieved consistently across the caseload. The project faced challenges arising from the wider administrative and operational processes of the CMS including challenging incorrect calculations and compliance enforcement. The project is still in early stages of implementation and should it continue for a sustained period, there will be a key opportunity to explore wider financial gain and wider outcomes on families and children.

One emergent issue being encountered by the project is legal representation for resident parent households at tribunal stage of enforcement which has arisen in an active case the coordinator is supporting. This has been impossible to source and has not been covered by legal aid and has limited the case at this stage. Work is being undertaken by Fife Gingerbread and the CMC to scope potential solutions to this. This has included initial conversations with the Scottish Child Law Centre as well as engaging with a local MP for further advice. The project has identified a wider legislative and practice gap in the support of families who reach this stage.

Financial gain within the project has also been shaped by wider structures such as levels of social security. It was raised across the project both by families and other stakeholders on the 'level of support' that would be obtained from non-resident parents where deductions were being made from levels of support that were already set at low levels.

Significant financial gain has been achieved by the project which has had benefits for the children and young people in the receiving household. As the project has progressed and more intermediate or complex type cases started to come on stream, the coordinator encountered limitations of support and more intensive work required within cases they were supporting. Wider scoping and exploration are required on support needs of families at the tribunal stage.

Training programme on child maintenance

The CMC carried out a series of outreach meetings with local level organisations supporting families. This scoping work was used to understand organisational expertise and needs, remit, and other key contextual factors on engagement within this area as well as approaches required to support collaboration with the test and learn project.

Scoping work provided an understanding of local knowledge and supported the coordinator to develop a half day participatory training program on child maintenance 'Confident Conversations' which has been delivered both internally within Fife Gingerbread and across three organisations working with families to date, with a fourth organisation pending. To date, this has covered 73 participants.

These sessions were delivered in person within support and advice services and have focused on the following learning outcomes:

- Understanding the CMS and general context on child maintenance as well as diverse types of arrangements.
- Providing signposting to relevant documents and evidence such as guidance for separating parents.
- Framing conversations around child maintenance adopting a framing of a child's rights focus.
- Routes/approaches for further support for families within the Fife locality requiring support with child maintenance.

The coordinator was a competent trainer, who created a positive learning environment in the observed session and provided engaging and informative training which utilized resources such as animation and interactive tools to support learning and participation. Usage of local level experiences and successful cases provided by the coordinator provided tangible and context specific examples for Fife enabling practitioners to garner practice examples and supported practitioner motivation on what could be 'wins' for their service users.

Example feedback from post evaluation questionnaire included:

"A better way of bringing child maintenance into conversation. Improved knowledge to answer queries and understanding for where can be signposted"
(Course participant).

"I have an understanding of the system and how to approach conversations"
(Course participant).

Through the 'Confident Conversations' programme, the coordinator has looked to engage and support practitioners with an original approach and framing of child maintenance, where conversations are grounded in a firm belief that children are entitled to fair financial support from both parents, wherever possible. The child's rights focus and the recognition of the broader incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) within Scotland has proven to be a useful policy and practice entry point to engage and attract organisations and practitioners into the test and learn project. Wider promotion of children's rights more generally within Scotland, has resulted in this framing around child maintenance being seen as 'relevant' and 'motivational' within feedback from organisations and practitioners to consider more how children and young people's rights can be upheld and promoted within a Scottish context on this policy issue.

Other key drivers of interest from practitioners have included:

- Utilising child maintenance as an approach to income maximization,
- Utilising child maintenance as a tool to alleviate poverty,
- Understanding child maintenance as a lever in tackling economic abuse as a form of gender-based violence.

Within the delivery of 'Confident Conversations,' practitioners recognized that historically within their work, conversations around child maintenance could often stray into difficult, conflict laden areas and often focused on the transactional transfer of money between parents/caregivers as opposed to a focus on children's wellbeing and 'right to be supported.'

Furthermore, the training provided for practitioners an opportunity to consider their own positionality on child maintenance, considering their own specific 'lived' and 'living' experiences of the issue. This emerged from data drawn from the staff focus group as well as wider feedback. This was important to ensure a consistent delivery approach and to acknowledge that the subject matter may be triggering trauma for practitioners dependent on their own personal history.

Alongside this, the training also provided an opportunity to address unconscious bias on the topic of child maintenance more generally, providing a space to consider ideas and beliefs and assumptions held. This is critical learning from the test and learn project in terms of the implementation of trauma informed practice and addressing barriers that often go unrecognized within the area of child maintenance.

Recognising the numbers of the engaging caseload who had experienced domestic abuse, a strong working collaboration has developed with Fife Women's Aid. This has been an example of linking different components of the project to create a tailored approach to the service and their supported population.

As an entry point training, the approach offered was sufficient for introductory knowledge. The project would benefit from the creation of a more tiered training approach and reference resources to support learning and to create a more specialist tier workforce.

Further work has been undertaken to roll out the knowledge more generally. The CMC has identified opportunities beyond their original remit. This has included offering training to case workers working for MPs who may be encountering case work from constituency surgeries and engagement more generally.

Key learning for further project development:

- Discussions are being held within the project on the potential for further upskilling beyond the initial training. There may be a need creating a practitioner network to embed and further knowledge for the project going forward.
- To support wider engagement in the project from other audiences, a key area that would benefit from further consideration could be further embedding the children rights approach within the project.
- As an area of development, further work on trauma informed practice within the training would strengthen this area of change.

Fife Women's Aid: Case Study

The CMC led initial outreach to sense check and understand the experiences of Fife Women's Aid around child maintenance. This allowed the test and learn project to align to Fife Women's Aid ongoing delivery approach.

Prior to the involvement of the coordinator, child maintenance was a little addressed aspect of the work of Fife Women's Aid, due to the reluctance of their service users to engage on the topic. The service explained that a core challenge they met within support work was the perception of risks or potential negative consequences or reprisals from domestic abuse perpetrators, when survivors explored or requested child maintenance from a non-resident parent who was a perpetrator. They highlighted broader trends of economic abuse and the relationship with gender-based violence as well as the importance of work conducted recognizing risks or harms of incorrect advice around child maintenance.

Wider evidence has shown the scale of economic abuse²⁷ with figures suggesting that one in six people in the UK have experienced economic abuse . More broadly the work of Glinski (2023) highlights the connections and dynamics between different components of economic abuse and risks faced in post separation period including²⁸:

- Restricting access to joint or sole bank accounts
- Refusing to contribute to household costs/purposely stopping payments
- Withholding child maintenance payments.

Provision of support on child maintenance therefore within the service was a complex area. The service worked with the CMC through the delivery of child maintenance training 'Confident Conversations' delivered by the coordinator. Evaluations cited the framing of a child's rights approach had opened opportunities for greater dialogue with survivors on this topic. The framing as tool allowed a new way of considering the area in an empowering way which allowed survivors a new lens to situate the topic of child maintenance.

The facilitation of a drop-in approach through Women's Aid allowed survivors the opportunity to speak to the coordinator. The service praised that the twofold approach of drop-ins alongside training had offered flexibility and the opportunity to build trusting relationships as well as providing a more strategic approach to collaborating with the pilot project within their wider service delivery model. More generally the support with casework by the CMC offered in-depth benefits to the survivors who had specific support whilst navigating their case.

Whilst the service welcomed the approach by the pilot project, they highlighted wider inequalities around economic abuse and gender-based violence. Wider issues that survivors were navigating meant that child maintenance was one of many needs faced. More generally, the importance of the CMS working more effectively to support survivors of domestic abuse was highlighted and for more effective use of the enforcement legalisation to ensure children received the maintenance they were entitled to.

Influencing and awareness activities

A key goal of the project has been to participate in wider lobbying and campaigning on child maintenance issues. In terms of key influencing routes, this has predominantly been focused on policy and third sector stakeholders alongside contribution into the broader project partnership of the Institute of Public Policy Research and One Parent Families Scotland.

Learning from the test and learn project highlights a variety of system issues within the child maintenance system. The CMC has looked to share learning and practice from the project both locally and nationally, which has included running workshops at a national money advice conference as well as at local events where there would be relevant stakeholders. The coordinator has also engaged with multiple influencing opportunities including a learning session with the DWP as well as submitting evidence to relevant consultations, such as the enforcement consultation run in October/November 2023. As part of this broader work, the coordinator has led engagement sessions with families providing a vital opportunity for parents to share their views. This has had wider outcomes in terms of parents reflecting that they have felt 'listened to' and that their experiences were being 'valued'.

Wider points of connection which can be used as key communication moments for the work have also been identified and used for example publicising submission from the project or changes within the CMS itself such as the removal of the £20.00 application fee.

The project has also sought to mobilise locally through meeting with MPs as well as hosting a wider session to allow MPs the opportunity to come along and meet with parents. Discovery work has also taken place to supplement discussions through Freedom of Information Requests.

Currently with a new consultation running on child maintenance²⁹ and the new government, there is a new opportunity to consider the influencing routes and opportunities for knowledge exchange of the evidence the project holds.

Key learning for further project development:

- Whilst the project was able to help promote a narrative of children's rights, wider work to support this framing more generally, for example, through local level media and other key outlets could build more awareness. The project has been limited in terms of its local media profile and this may be something to further explore. More broadly, however, the framing of the project sits within a continually challenging context and requires broader consensus building across Scottish and UK contexts to build wider stakeholder engagement in the issue.

Other learning on child maintenance

Online system and information recording:

Information submitted through online applications required by the CMS appears not to be recorded consistently within the system. The CMC has noted that in some cases where previously submitted information has been missing from case files and this has required to be resubmitted verbally through calls to a case advisor. This duplication for the resident parent in providing information is eroding trust in the CMS.

In terms of reporting information through the online Portal of the Child Maintenance Service, there is currently an unclear mechanism to report part payment of child maintenance by a resident parent. The CMC also reported the need in some cases to provide Child Maintenance Advisors with verbal updates on incomplete payments and changing levels of arrears being accrued.

Priority debts allocation and child maintenance:

The CMC role has uncovered issues with the allocation and repayment process of wider public debts which some resident parents owe. Within the UC system, there is an allocation of deduction of debts when a claimant has multiple forms of debt, for example, previous social fund loans or other form of public debt to the DWP. In terms of the reclaiming of these debts, child maintenance is not 'seen' within the repayment systems as the priority debt whereby there are multiple debts.

This approach within DWP administrative processes fails to consider the implications that servicing this debt first could play as a debt form which is 'effectively owed to a child or children'. Child maintenance has the potential to be a preventative poverty proofing measure if it is reframed and reprioritised by policy and decision makers.

Costs and expectations on providing evidence:

In more complex cases, evidence requirements by the CMS take multiple forms. Within this test and learn project, there have been examples of the service requiring detailed information to be submitted on the non-resident parent. This was information they were able to source or the CMS communicated an expectation on the resident parent to carry out investigative work to support their claim.

Alongside this is the hidden financial implications such as expecting information such as supporting documentation to be sent recorded delivery which places additional 'system' costs on the resident parent and their child(ren) who may already be affected by wider system charges through collect and pay. These costs place further financial pressure on resident parents' households, many of whom are already living on a low income and provide a barrier to engagement with the CMS.

On a wider level, there was an onus on self-monitoring within direct pay processes between the resident and non-resident parent. As a result of this, there is evidence gaps within the CMS service on the arrears being accrued within the process.

Data management and calculation and compliance

The CMC has reported people being incorrectly placed within the child maintenance system support tiers of direct pay and collect and pay. This has been linked to incorrect calculation assessments and information on diverted income regarding what is recorded on HMRC and what may be actual income where non-resident parents are self-employed or have other assets that are being diverted.

Issues have also emerged on problems with deduction on earnings orders where there has been potential disguised compliance when the deductions of earnings have been administered through family business and there is potential conflict of interest and minimal compliance with the system.

More cases included calculation disputes resulting in delays or arrears in payments and disputed levels of cases i.e. cases being removed from collect and pay to direct pay. The CMC highlighted cases related to domestic abuse, where the process of dispute was used as a way to maintain economic abuse which the administrative processes allowed for.

Incorrect collections and arrears figures have also been a problem with the collect and pay tier of the service and has resulted in incorrect figures on the resident and non-resident structure charging process and additionally penalising resident parents.

Lack of continuity in system:

There is no central route for an external advocate or support worker to navigate or query the CMS unlike within other statutory services. This has resulted in lengthy phone calls going through the main switchboard and inconsistency and ineffective support time within the call handling process due to reaching different advisors on every case. This system design undermines the effectiveness of outside support agencies and of the test and learn project in terms of their capacity and time and potential reach.

Accessible information:

There is a lack of clear and accessible information on the central government website available for resident parents on supporting cases where there may be more unusual circumstances beyond employment for example whereby a non-resident parent is for example in further or higher education. Redesigning the main government website with accessible case studies would help promote uptake of child maintenance and greater clarity on differing circumstances where child maintenance could be achieved for children and young people's needs.

A gendered approach to child maintenance would ensure that victims and survivors are supported, and that child maintenance does not serve as mechanism within households for reinforced or commencement of gender-based violence. Within the project, the CMC has identified many issues, this has included:

- Situations where households with survivors of gender-based violence have been incorrectly advised by the CMS to engage or collect evidence from non-resident parent risking households' safety and violation of court orders to protect households from harassment.
- The need for quality assurance processes within the CMS to ensure that advisors are correctly trained and alert to the signs of gender-based violence of all forms including economic abuse regardless of if there has been a disclosure made by resident parent.

Missing populations within child maintenance

The project more generally has identified the need for further evidence and research on child maintenance across protected characteristics and the need to apply an intersectional lens to barriers and challenges that different populations may be experiencing. Bringing in wider learning and understanding of other systemic inequalities trends may help the project situate and improve its reach and therefore provide new insights and evidence to use for influencing.

Tribunal representation

A clear policy and practice gap has emerged on the lack of effective infrastructure for parents to be supported at tribunal stage within child maintenance claims. Within the Fife locality, the project has been limited in terms of resources it could access for support and this area falls with the coordinators remit and expertise. This has resulted in a more challenging pathway for households that reached this stage although wider work is undertaken to support solutions to this, at present this hasn't been resolved. Wider scoping work on this area is required across Scotland.

The project has highlighted multiple systems problems or challenges being encountered by families in establishing and sustaining and enforcement of child maintenance arrangement across a range of types of arrangements.

Taking a trauma informed approach to child maintenance

A wider intention of the test and learn approach to child maintenance in Fife was to adopt a trauma informed approach^h to child maintenance. This was drawn from the approach and ethos of Fife Gingerbread in their broader work with families.

Being trauma-informed means being able to recognize when someone may be affected by trauma and collaboratively adjusting how we work to take this into account and responding in a way that supports people's resilience³⁰.

Evidence has illustrated that trauma can be experienced as a single incident or experience known as Type One to multiple or recurring experiences which can form Type Two or complex trauma. Trauma of either type can have long lasting impacts including negative health outcomes for those affected. Indeed, recent research estimates that 60% of people in the UK have experienced some form of trauma in their lives³¹.

The definition of trauma utilised in the national trauma workforce refers to

The term 'trauma' or 'psychological trauma' refers to how a person experiences the event(s), recognising that individuals can experience the same event(s) differently. The experiences can be a single or repeated occurrence and the effects may occur immediately or be delayed (or both), may be long- or short-term, and may not be recognised as connected to the original trauma³².

The relationship between child maintenance and trauma is well documented. Significant reforms have been introduced to child maintenance legislation around the Domestic Abuse Act 2023 . The volume of households accessing the child maintenance system due to domestic abuse is significant. Figures on the number of households who received a waiver of the £20.00 application indicated three-fifths (60%) of CMS customers receive the £20 application fee waiver on grounds of domestic abuse, eligibility for which requires the abuse to have been reported³³. Within the test and learn project, 38% of those within the caseload reported they were survivors of domestic abuse.

Alongside wider UK evidence, previous research within Fife on child maintenance has illustrated experiences of child maintenance were often shaped and influenced by the wider experience of trauma such as domestic abuse and wider intersectional inequalities. This was also illustrated in the parent interviews for this evaluation with one describing how receiving texts message from the CMS was challenging.

^h A trauma informed approach involves recognition of trauma, collaboratively adjusting how we take into account and responding in a way that supports recovery and does no harm and recognises and supports peoples resilience.

“Think women that’s been through similar like I said. They out with the text messages can be a bit of. A trigger, yeah.” **(Interview with supported parent)**

“He keeps contacting me so I had to get a ring doorbell for my own safety because he was emailing text phone call social media, he was like trying to find every way that he could to communicate with me, and I felt unsafe.”
(Interview with supported parent)

Experiences of trauma can shape and influence how people respond and interact with systems. As part of a growing recognition of experiences of trauma and how it affects service experience, organisations are now looking to embed a trauma informed approach.

Within the project, in terms of adopting a trauma informed approach, the examples in the table below were given as considerations and adaptations in the model of support offered to reflect principles of trauma informed practice. This data has been drawn from the reflective logs from the Child Maintenance Coordinator and other key reflections from staff focus group. Across the Fife Gingerbread the organisation follows a trauma informed approach.

Rs of Trauma Informed Practice	Approach in practice within test and learn project
<p>Realising how common the experience of trauma and adversity is.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition by the CMC on evidence on previous research findings on the higher rates of women who have experienced an abusive or a negative relationship in relation to child maintenance³⁵. This has framed and underpinned thinking on the anticipated and actual caseload of the project and the CMC has upskilled their knowledge and understanding of working with households that have experienced domestic abuse. • Wider exploration of the child maintenance landscape and consideration of flashpoints within child maintenance sustainability where trauma could be a potential influencing factor for example households who have previously exited the child maintenance arrangements. • Understanding how previous experiences of services may have impacted a person’s trust of a service. Incorporating an operational approach within the project whereby households can engage in a space that feels comfortable and ‘safe’ either in their own home or within a community-based setting. By offering home visits this can remove wider barriers such as fitting support around employment or caring responsibilities or wider needs such as mental health.

Rs of Trauma Informed Practice	Approach in practice within test and learn project
<p>Recognizing the different ways trauma can be experienced.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepening a project understanding of gender-based violence such as coercive control and economic abuse and the mechanisms that structural design of systems such as a child maintenance can have in terms of reinforcing trauma. This has included the CMC’s exploration of approaches to system design such as alternative banking arrangements whereby sort codes and other key identifiers can be removed to decrease risk of harm in up-taking arrangements. • Operating a strength-based approach when working with families providing clear support to upskill households in navigating arrangements of all types. • Ensuring that where trauma is disclosed it done so in a person-centred approach where households are clear on doing so only if they wish to and sharing in a way that is appropriate to them.
<p>Responding by taking account of the ways that people can be affected by trauma to support recovery and recognising people’s resilience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming specific referral pathways to engage with the project that link with organisations who will be working with families who have experienced trauma. • ‘Doing with’ rather than ‘to’. The CMC demonstrated transparency and collaboration in decision making with families in caseload. This included being clear on limits and boundaries of their supporting role and where expertise is not held within project for example when reaching tribunal stage.
<p>Looking for opportunities to resist re traumatization and offer a greater sense of control, empowerment and collaboration and safety with everyone you have contact with</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopting an approach whereby the project is situated within a wider context of support allowing for families to be effectively supported by the wider service when required. Communication has been central in terms of ensuring ‘safety’ where there has been a more effective and more specialist support available. • Clarity on the boundaries of the role of the CMC and where the limitations of that role lie to support transparency on what support offer entails and boundaries and limitations of that role. • The CMC operating a non-judgemental approach which recognises the importance of feeling heard when sharing a difficult or traumatic experience.

Rs of Trauma Informed Practice	Approach in practice within test and learn project
<p>Recognising the central importance of relationships.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering a model where there is ‘space’ within the engagement approach to digest and consider options and to support effective and collaborative choices and decision making within the project and respecting the choices and autonomy of the decisions that are made by households. • Providing tools and signposting to resources that support communication when there is breakdown of relationship. • Operating a child rights approach throughout the project to support a framing of the respective components of the project – training, case work etc

Test and learn year one project recommendations

Recommendations for the continued delivery of the project are made here in relation to the separate strands of the project.

1. Support pathways for financial mitigation

The project established successful pathways for supporting mitigation of collect and pay fees alongside applications fees now redundant due to wider policy change. From the evaluation interviews conducted as part of this evaluation, initial evidence on fee mitigation suggests this has highlighted potential positive benefits for child outcomes, but wider evaluation is required to understand this at scale across a wider cohort of recipients. On this basis, it is recommended the project continues to pilot this approach.

2. Targeted casework with families

Data on protected characteristics

- Further analysis of protected characteristics across the caseload (such as age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and disability) and scoping work to understand who is benefiting from the project and gaps in engagement across intersections of protected characteristics (including ethnicity and sexual orientation for example).

Increasing outreach and engagement

- Building on the current outreach approach, the project should review touch points where information about the project could be shared and create wider opportunities for engaging with families. More generally the project could consider if there could be wider pathways, linkages with statutory services such as health visiting and more generally in co-located advice services such as community link workers and within education. Currently the project is reliant on other third sector organisations for referrals.
- Outreach within the project could also be aligned with targeting specific populations or groups including priority family groups as well as potentially exploring cultural understandings and barriers to successful and sustainable child maintenance arrangements.
- As the project moves to a new stage, greater planning is required to consider scale and sustainability on the number of caseloads that can be supported by the project. The creation of more detailed data sharing on child maintenance with key referral partners may also assist with the support of predicting and allocating resources and to support wider data gathering and intelligence on system issues and solutions.

- The value of home visits has clearly been highlighted by families but the resource intensive nature of this will require balancing this alongside wider caseload demands whilst recognising the individual needs of families.

Complex cases

- Recognising the challenges of supporting complex cases³⁵ reaching tribunal stage, the project should consider how this is managed within the caseload and what alternative support or development may be needed.
- The project has developed a strong trauma informed approach informing delivery. The project team should continue to build upon this in terms of all strands of its work. Wider investment to continue to track and monitor this is required. However given the evidence on trauma that has emerged within the project and within previous research, it is important that the risk to staff engaging on work in this area are recognised and that appropriate support is in place. This needs to include the recognition of the approach of 'collective care' recognising the importance of institutional and cultural approaches within workforces in supporting staff in trauma informed practice and care.

Staff support

- Based on the evidence within this evaluation, it is recommended that clinical supervision, ongoing training on implementing trauma informed practice, as well as clear access to Employee Assistance Programme are available. This also needs to be aligned with wider considerations on worker wellbeing and risk assessment where more complex cases arise.
- There is also a need to ensure the balance of the CMC role in terms of core delivery supporting cases, delivering training and providing a wider campaigning and advocacy role.

3. Training programme development

- The creation of a practitioner network for sharing advice and learning is recommended. More generally the potential of a practitioner network or alternative resource may be helpful to reinforce and enhance the initial work established across local practitioners
- Whilst the 'Confident Conversations' training was framed on a limited one session model, it was clear there was a need for additional training recognizing the complexity of cases presented and to further extend the reach of work that could be achieved in this area outside of the host organisation of Fife Gingerbread.

⁴⁰⁾ 'Collective care' refers to intergrated roeognsiton and practice on wellbeing recognsing the wider environment.

4. Influencing and awareness

- Whilst the project was able to help promote a narrative of children's rights within the services it engaged, there was a need for wider work to support this framing more generally with broader public awareness, for example, though local level media and other key outlets for building understanding. The project has been limited in terms of its local media profile and this may be something to further explore. Moreover, there was a need for the project to consider what local level work it is doing to sustain and build that message across the public and within other key services that families may be engaging within.

Taking a trauma informed approach to child maintenance

Given the evidence on trauma that has emerged within the project and within previous research, it is important that the staff engaging on work in this area are supported. This needs to include the recognition of the approach of 'collective care' recognising the importance of institutional and cultural approaches within workforces in supporting staff in trauma informed practice and care. Based on the evidence within this evaluation, it is recommended that clinical supervision, ongoing training on implementing trauma informed practice, as well as clear access to Employee Assistance Programme. This also needs to be aligned with wider considerations on worker wellbeing and risk assessment where more complex cases arise.

The importance of recognising intersectional experiences of trauma is also a vital consideration as this project continues. The project would benefit from a greater recognition of experiences of different demographics for example recognising that it is estimated that between 60% to 80% of LGBT+ survivors have never reported abuse or sought advice from support services³⁶ and considering how it could meet the needs of other marginalised groups such as disabled people households.

Test and learn year one wider system recommendations

Whilst the project has sought to actively use information and learning captured during this project and has applied strong strategies to share this at key influencing opportunities, it is been less tangible what the level of influence the test and learn approach has been able to have in terms of specific operational change of the CMS although organisationally the project was praised during a Westminster debate by a local MP Peter Grant. This MP has also supported wider influencing work of the project providing advice alongside practical support with request such as the Complex Needs toolkit, a resource that is utilised within the CMS service for directing advisors.

In terms of the limited resources of the CMC within the project, the project should consider how to build on the active influencing routes and deeper dive into two or three key influencing issues as an influencing model to ensure capacity for other components of the project. Given the time bound nature of the project it may also be helpful to explore if there are wider local influencing opportunities that could be utilising the learning from the test and learn approach to support local change.

Conclusions

The project findings on issues with the current child maintenance system builds on the existing evidence base and the need for reform on child maintenance in the UK. The project evaluated in this report, whilst valuable in its approach, is limited in terms of the outcomes it can achieve in the context of wider systemic issues. These issues were explored in detail in the report and include for example, issues around miscalculations of child maintenance, lack of advocacy for families and evidence of continued economic abuse by perpetrators using the system. Opportunities to test other local solutions to some of these issues may be valuable for the project to explore.

The project has provided a 'one stop shop' for families within the Fife locality to receive a trauma informed approach to child maintenance. It has also delivered across four project streams through the provision of targeted casework support for parents, training programmes on child maintenance and 'Confident Conversations' for practitioners supporting parents, creating pathways for financial mitigation and through influencing and awareness activities.

There is evidence in this year one evaluation of a range of positive impacts and outcomes of the project.

1. Early evidence reported in this evaluation points to strong local interest and engagement by families and practitioners both internally within Fife Gingerbread and externally within other family support and advice services.
2. A caseload of 49 parents across the project have been supported with financial gain of £22,500 as of May 24.
3. New evidence has been captured on system issues that builds on previous evidence³⁷.
4. Training with 73 practitioners through the 'Confident Conversations' programme has taken place and been evaluated with outcomes including increased understanding of the child maintenance system.
5. This short-term evaluation has not been able to look at longer-term outcomes for parents and children. However, the first evaluation illustrates the value and benefits of the project for parents. The project had served a wider preventative role in terms of stopping parents giving up on 'complex cases' or exiting the service and therefore limiting or removing access to maintenance.
6. The project also showed strong development work in an approach to mitigation of charges within the system of collect and pay, whilst there was only limited uptake in practice due to the limited sample it could be applied to, the project demonstrated that a local level approach could reduce the impact of charging.

Additional to these successes, the project has particularly been well placed to identify multiple problems in the operational and strategic approach of the CMS and to feed this in a 'real time' context through mechanisms such as the All-Party Parliamentary group, within meetings with MPs, taking part in DWP round tables and other key influencing spaces. Engaging in multiple high-level discussions and utilising tools such as freedom of information requests has been an important aspect of the project to ensure up-to-date learning was shared, with the most relevant information.

As a broader learning point, whilst the project was able to help promote a narrative of children's rights within the services it engaged, there is a need for wider work to support this framing more widely including public awareness for example through local level media and other key outlets for building understanding. The children's rights framing has offered a positive and distinctive approach to equipping and empowering practitioners in a new way to approach child maintenance differently. This in turn has driven a wider lens for parents and caregivers to view and engage through.

There is also learning on what elements of the project worked/did not work and why which provides timely evidence for further development of the project. Key reflections include:

- The model of delivery in the test and learn project has required agility; the project has had to adapt and respond to local opportunities to build local support and the CMC has had to be adaptable to these opportunities. The project has also been working within a challenging and evolving context which has required flexibility and support to ensure a robust delivery approach.
- Scaling up of the test and learn approach to casework needs to be carefully considered recognizing the type of more complex cases that will naturally be drawn to the project and ensuring the capacity of staff and their wellbeing. In addition, the administrative support required needs to be considered.
- The project and the CMC developed clear recording approaches to fully understand the financial gain for service users.
- Recognizing the sensitivities in this area for practitioners, it is recommended that the project continue with adopting a trauma informed approach to the training and other key elements, including trauma informed support for the CMC.
- There is a need for further development of the infrastructure locally for cases where there has been domestic abuse and coercive control, or cases where there has been long term complexity such as prominent levels of arrears. It was clear that child maintenance needs to be considered for some households within a wider pathway of support.

The test and learn approach has highlighted key themes in terms of sustaining and scaling the project, opportunities for direction, prioritisation and targeting within the project and multiple lessons on a trauma informed approach to child maintenance. It has highlighted new avenues of work and engagement with practitioners. Further monitoring and capturing of learning in year two will allow deeper insights to be gained on this model of support and advocacy.

To conclude, the project evaluation illustrates that there is a need for targeted and tailored child maintenance support for a range of families but particularly families who have complex child maintenance circumstances. It is clear that prior to this project, there has been a lack of targeted training infrastructure within Fife on child maintenance and the project provided a useful addition for practitioners across support agencies as well as in house within Fife Gingerbread to build their knowledge and to support referrals. The project has highlighted the complexity of the work required to support families to receive regular sustainable and effective child maintenance arrangements and the importance of one to one, tailored support for parents.

Related Transforming Child Maintenance reports

Read the interim briefing report and all other related research reports:

Child Maintenance and its impact on child poverty and financial security for single parent families, Casey Smith and David Hawkey, IPPR Scotland.

This report presents findings from the first of the two-stage 'Transforming Child Maintenance' project, based on quantitative and qualitative research including focus groups, public polling, expert consultations, and statistical analysis. This stage of research involved identifying the main issues with the current child maintenance system, as set out in this briefing paper, to inform readers and stakeholders of where reform is most urgent. The briefing paper serves to inform the next stage of the research which aims to develop ambitious policy recommendations for reform of the child maintenance system.

Identifying 'the problem': Analysis of findings from Paying and Receiving Parent focus groups, Casey Smith, IPPR Scotland and Caitlin Logan Carter, One Parent Families Scotland.

This analysis brings together the findings from focus groups with Paying and Receiving Parents, hosted by One Parent Families Scotland and IPPR Scotland, focused on identifying the various issues parents cite while reflecting on their experience with the child maintenance system.

Child maintenance polling results, Dave Hawkey, IPPR Scotland.

This slide package sets out the key findings from the polling commissioned by IPPR Scotland and conducted by Diffley Partnership. More than 1,000 adult parents in Scotland were polled in March 2024, with the aim of understanding the attitude of parents towards the current UK child maintenance system, what it should accomplish, and how it should work.

The role of the existing child maintenance system in children's financial security, Dave Hawkey, IPPR Scotland.

This report is a statistical analysis which delves into the Department for Work and Pension's Family Resource Survey and Households Below Average Income dataset to examine the relationship between child maintenance the children's financial security, particularly the impact on child poverty in the UK.

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Registered at Edinburgh under number 094860.
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