

Government needs to do more to improve the welfare of separated families

A report published today by the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) calls on the government to do more to ensure that after parents separate, the social security and child maintenance systems supports the welfare of both parents and their children.

There are 2.5 million separated families, including 3.9 million children, in Great Britain. Separation is often an extremely difficult and challenging life event, which carries an increased risk of negative outcomes and poorer life chances for children and parents involved. The report considers the experience of separated parents and their children in the social security and child maintenance systems. It particularly looks at the experience of parents who are not the main carers, but who want a continuing parental role – a group who are often overlooked. Overall, it recognises the difficult public policy choices faced by governments but asks whether separated parents are getting the support they need through a challenging and stressful time in their lives.

The report finds that many separated parents share caring responsibilities for their children. However, those who need to claim social security can struggle to share care because the system assumes there is one main carer and so only one parent can be entitled to child-related benefits. The other parent can only receive single adult benefits which do not factor in the inevitable costs of caring for children even if parents are sharing care.

In particular, young non-resident parents may struggle to share care, as housing support in the private-rented sector typically only covers a room for an adult in shared accommodation. This can make it difficult, or impossible in some cases, for a parent to have their child or children to stay overnight.

Much of the existing research has understandably focused on the parent with whom the children live most of the time and highlights the severe negative impact that separation can have on their financial well-being. However, children may also experience hardship if and when they are with their other parent and emerging evidence suggests that paying child maintenance can push parents into poverty.

Research found that separated parents without main responsibility of childcare have a poverty rate of 30% compared to 21% amongst working age adults.

The report concludes that a lack of clear, consistent and helpful publicly available advice makes it hard for separated parents to navigate what is a complex social security system and so adds to their stress during separation. Sometimes parents feel they have been very poorly treated by the Child Maintenance Service, with poor communication resulting in confusion and

unnecessarily long delays to child maintenance arrangements being set up.

Liz Sayce, the Committee's interim chair, said:

Social security needs to enable children, and families, to thrive whether or not parents have separated. We urge the government to develop a clear strategy for supporting separated parents in the social security system. While there is a general policy focus on children's welfare, the government does not appear to be considering separated parents and their children's welfare as a joined-up issue.

We recognise that there are no easy policy solutions. Nevertheless, we believe that improvements are needed to ensure separated parents, both those with main and without main responsibility of care, are not unduly suffering. This is vital to ensure no negative impact on the welfare of their children.

The committee recommends that:

1. The government clearly and publicly articulates a strategy for separated parents (including parents without main caring responsibility) and their children with respect to the social security system. We recommend that a cross-departmental working group is set up to lead urgent action on the strategy and issues highlighted in this report.
2. The quality and availability of data on parents without the main responsibility of care should be improved to get a better understanding of the scale and nature of the problems created by the social security system and its interaction with the child maintenance system. These data should also help define evidence-based policy solutions to deliver the government's strategy and allow progress against the strategy to be assessed and monitored objectively.
3. We are not making general recommendations to change benefit rules because we believe that better data and a clear overarching strategy are needed first. However, there are obvious challenges for separated parents to share care under current policy for housing support in the social security system. Therefore, we recommend that:
 - a) The housing element of Universal Credit should enable young parents, under 35 years, who are sharing care and paying child maintenance, to have their children to stay overnight.
 - b) Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should consider options for the system to support all parents without the main responsibility of care and with more than one child to stay with them overnight.

We would also encourage DWP to consider ways to improve the child maintenance formula. For example, review the earnings thresholds, which have not been updated since 1998, to ensure they factor in the well-being and living standards of both parents and their children.

The Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) is an independent advisory body of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The committee's role is to give advice on social security issues; scrutinise and report on social security regulations (including tax credits) and to consider and advise on any matters referred to it by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions or the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland.

The Committee membership comprises:

- Liz Sayce (Interim Chair)
- Bruce Calderwood
- David Chrimes
- Carl Emmerson
- Chris Goulden
- Philip Jones
- Jim McCormick
- Grainne McKeever
- Dominic Morris
- Seyi Obakin
- Charlotte Pickles
- Victoria Todd

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