

Single mum wins 17 year child maintenance battle

A single mum from Runcorn is celebrating after winning a 17 year battle with the Child Support Agency (CSA) over maintenance payments for her son.

Thirty nine-year-old Lisa Fitzgerald has been forced to endure a catalogue of errors, maladministration and incompetence from the CSA but a report, just issued by the Parliamentary Ombudsman, has finally delivered justice.



Lisa Fitzgerald, with her son Liam

Within four weeks of the report, she should receive all back payments, plus interest, compensation, a full apology from the CSA and legal costs.

Lisa, who works as a building firm accounts assistant, is overjoyed the case is finally resolved and she will at last receive maintenance support for her 17-year-old son. Over the years she has made dozens of phone calls and written countless letters to the CSA, as well as complaining to her MP Derek Twigg, the CSA Independent Case Examiner and even a Secretary of State, Peter Hain.

She said: "I can't believe how much the CSA has cocked it up. They have been totally incompetent. It has been very frustrating and very stressful but I would urge other single parents not to give up the long battle. If you think something is not right, keep on fighting."

The Ombudsman was severely critical of the CSA's treatment of Miss Fitzgerald. The report said: "She has been persistent in seeking payment through the Agency but the Agency has repeatedly failed to provide her with the help, support and level of service she was entitled to expect from them.

"Miss Fitzgerald's son is now 17 and it is self-evident that, if Miss Fitzgerald had received the money she should have, it would have had an impact on their life when it was most important, while her son was growing up."

The turning point came when Miss Fitzgerald, after receiving constant knock-backs, decided to engage Frodsham child support specialist solicitor Stephen Lawson, of Forshaws Davies Ridgway, to take up her case in 2006.

She believes it was his threat of seeking a judicial review that finally spurred the CSA into action. "Without the intervention of Stephen Lawson, my file would still be sitting in their bottom drawer," she said.

When he reviewed her case, Stephen Lawson was astonished at the catalogue of CSA errors dating back since 1993. These include inaccurate assessments, constant delays, letters being delivered to the wrong address, a failure to obtain a sale order on the absent father's house and worst of all, a failure to set up a payment order when the father was serving in the Army and easily traceable.

Although Miss Fitzgerald has received occasional payments from her ex-boyfriend, the former soldier has constantly tried to dodge his financial obligations and the CSA has not been robust in chasing him up.

Mr Lawson said: "Miss Fitzgerald is a hard-working single parent who has struggled to bring up her son without the maintenance that she was entitled to receive – and which the CSA could have easily recovered.

“The CSA has failed her and her son very badly and sadly continues to fail thousands of vulnerable single parent families who look to the organisation to provide them with vital support. Most single parents give up when faced with this huge bureaucratic barrier, so all credit to Miss Fitzgerald who has kept fighting for justice and whose persistence has at last been vindicated.”

EDITOR’S NOTES:

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