

Frodsham solicitor calls for CSA fair deal for parents

Frodsham solicitor Stephen Lawson, a child support specialist, is leading a national fight from the legal profession to win a fair deal for parents.

Earlier this week he and a colleague from Resolution, formerly the Solicitors Family Law Association, met with Work and Pensions Minister Maria Miller in London to raise concerns over proposals for the future of the Child Support Agency (CSA) outlined in the Government's green paper, "Strengthening Families, Promoting Parental Responsibility".

Under the proposals, the Government wants to encourage parents to resolve their own maintenance issues and if they don't, to charge them for using the CSA, whether or not the organisation is successful in obtaining maintenance payments from absent parents.

It also wants parents to enter into voluntary "family-based" or private agreements, but offers no redress to single mums or dads when the non-resident parent fails to pay up.

Stephen Lawson, who is a partner with Forshaws Davies Ridgway LLP, is concerned the reforms will result in a poorer service for hard-up single parent families, particularly where the absent parent is deliberately evading his or her maintenance duties.

He said: "The CSA has run up a massive backlog of £3.8 billion in uncollected maintenance payments since it was set up in 1993, so it has a mixed record of delivery. We believe it is unfair to charge parents up-front fees when there is no guarantee the CSA will be successful in chasing up difficult cases.

"It's a fine aspiration to want all parents to sort out their own affairs but in some cases it is just not practical, particularly when an absent parent is being uncooperative or their financial affairs are not straightforward as often happens with self-employed people or company directors.

“Contrary to the consultation recommendations, ‘family-based’ agreements must be made enforceable, otherwise parents will have no redress when their former partners refuse to pay up.

“And if fees are introduced, we strongly believe the CSA has a duty to sign up to an agreed set of quality standards of service and delivery otherwise parents involved in difficult cases will end up adding to their misery by paying for a service they are not receiving.”

The Government is due to respond to the consultation in early summer.

- **Stephen Lawson, child support specialist and partner at Forshaws Davies Ridgway, is the co-author of a new book “Safe Routes to Child Support”, just published by Resolution, formerly the Solicitors Family Law Association. Written with leading London solicitors James Pirrie and Benjamin Carter, the book is a comprehensive study of all child support options and includes a detailed analysis of the CSA and how to get the best outcomes, with case studies, sample letters, checklists and practical ‘how-to’ advice. The book, priced £70 to non-members, is available from Monday 12 April and can be ordered from Resolution. www.resolution.org.uk. Tel 01689 585671.**

EDITOR’S NOTES:

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