



# We need your help to bring about change in the CSA!

Research Paper by *Families Need Fathers* (FNF) produced out of responses to a survey conducted within the FNF membership

Families Need Fathers conducted a survey of members to ascertain the costs accrued in maintaining a child's contact with the 'non-resident' parent. 38 responded.

This survey involved calculating the costs of:

- accommodation (whether that be hotel/b&b rooms required during contact periods, extra rooms within the NRP's home etc)
- travel (in order to collect and return the children from the RP's home)
- food
- schooling
- clothing
- entertainment
- legal costs/mediation
- other (health, gifts, phone bills etc)

The survey also took into account the number of children and amount of parenting time they have with the NRP. Of course variants such as age of children will also affect the level of costs. The data are summarized at the accompanying Annex.

Findings from the data include:

- It was noted by some that costs to the NRP were identical to those of the RP.
- In a number of cases costs were (often significantly) higher for the NRP due to the one-sided need to travel in order to collect the child. In particular, several cases where the RP had moved abroad with the child involved **extremely high** travel costs for the NRP. (Parents 11,22,27,33,34) Parent 11 estimates that the costs accrued for 10 hours of parenting time for a visit abroad equate to £40/hr, while for parent 35 this figure is £67/night.
- Several of those who answered the survey felt the need ideally to maintain a home with a sufficient number of bedrooms. However, parent 1 is forced to sleep in his car during contact periods (children sleeping at the RP home), being unable to afford extra accommodation for himself, whilst parent 13 must sleep in a tent.
- NRPs felt the need to run a car for use during contact time and/or to collect and return children (parent 38 travels 1000 miles by train from London to Scotland to see his children. He has purchased a car which he leaves in Scotland which of course carries significant expense).
- NRPs often spent as much on clothes as the RP. (In more than one case the RP ordered that the child was not allowed to wear clothes from that home when with the NRP, necessitating an entire 2<sup>nd</sup> wardrobe (parents 6, 9)).
- Parent 5 emphasized the loss of earnings involved as he had been obliged to move home and job in order to maintain contact, having previously had to travel 1000 miles each month between the 2 homes.
- Several individuals were paying child maintenance to the RP through the CSA, in addition to all costs noted.
- A number of respondents were granted no contact at all, and therefore the most significant costs were for the use of legal services (parents 15, 29); the ex-partner of parent 6 refused to enter into mediation, thus resulting in legal bills of £6,000 over 6 years; parent 8 was granted limited parenting time through a contact centre, at no small cost (4 hours/month for £450).

Looking at the data in more detail:

- Most respondents had only one child (23 of the 38 who responded). None had more than three children.
- Travelling times varied widely but of those who had contact and responded, 27 out of 38 were travelling 10 miles or more to collect and deposit their child. 23 of the 27 were travelling more than 100 miles. In a flexible labour market and a global economy, resident parents often travel a long way to start a new life after divorce, and NRPs parents' travelling costs, for them and their children, rise accordingly.
- It is difficult to generalise about parenting time, but it is worth noting that very short periods of parenting time can involve significant journeys (see 1, 3, 10 etc etc). 19 were seeing their children weekly or more than 52 nights a year.
- Adding these together travel costs are considerable. Of the 30 who responded to this question, 20 had expenses above £400 a year, 17 above £1000.
- We did not get a complete set of responses on accommodation costs, probably because of the difficulty of estimating them when a child stays in the NRP's home. But it is clear that the child has to have a bedroom. Looking at UK house prices, the cost of an extra bedroom alone, in terms of rent or mortgage/purchase, is likely to be a significant sum if we consider the costs over the life of the child until it is 18 or 21. 10 of the 15 who responded have annual accommodation costs above £500 a year, with the peak at £5400.
- Feeding hungry children does not come cheap, as every parent knows. Of the 28 respondents, 3 were spending more than £1000 a year, 9 £500-1000 and 13 more than £100.
- And as noted above, NRPs often spend money on their children's clothes. 24 respondents did so regularly, enough to provide annual costings. All but four spent over £100 a year, with the peak at £2400.
- Entertainment is a very big expense, unavoidable when lively children are staying with you. 22 respondents provided annual costings. Everyone spent more than £100 a year, five spending £1000 or more.
- Then there is a host of other expenses, some of which are listed here: the child's mobile phone (often vital for staying in touch with the NRP), medical bills, pocket money, presents etc. 25 respondents provided costings, with 20 spending more than £100 a year.

- Total parenting costs, unsurprisingly, are considerable. 35 respondents gave a figure. For all but two these costs were over £1000 a year. 11 were spending more than £4000 a year.
- While paying all these costs for parenting, the NRP is often incurring substantial legal costs, often in an effort to preserve their relationship with their child. The responses indicate that these costs often run into thousands of pounds, with one respondent reporting a staggering £70,000.

## **Recommendations**

We do not of course claim that these results are statistically significant, but they give strong pointers to further research and policy development, and they accord with FNF's own experience of their members' experiences, and of others who use FNF services, especially our helpline.

So we make the following recommendations:

- (i) DWP and DFES should collaborate, with the voluntary sector, on a large scale research study, including a large sample of NRPs, of the costs of shared parenting, in its various forms, for the NRP.
- (ii) Child support policy needs to be based on realistic assessment of the costs of shared parenting for both parents. Over-focussing on one parent's financial position and costs and pursuing simplification at the cost of fairness, is a recipe for creating numerous injustices which will bring the system into disrepute. These principles need to be applied to the C-MEC Bill which DWP is about to introduce into Parliament.
- (iii) Our survey indicates that these costs include accommodation, travel, entertainment and a wide range of other costs. The system needs to learn how to handle these complex realities. We set out in our response to the White Paper an alternative policy model.

## **Concluding Points**

So, we call for an assumption of shared parenting, with the associated redress of allocated financial support which, judging by researched trends, would result in less acrimony between parties due, in part, to an easier and more predictable flow of willingly given maintenance payments.