



Voices of experience

Child Maintenance Service

Citizen Experience Excellence 2024-25



Child Maintenance Service: A digital-first transformation

The Child Maintenance Service (CMS), run by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), is a vital service that helps ensure money is paid to support children in their upbringing.

By its very nature, the CMS operates in an environment where the relationship between two parents has broken down and therefore plays a key facilitating role between the parent paying child maintenance and the parent receiving it. There are two levels of service: Direct Pay, where parents use CMS tooling to enter information and receive guidance on what the level of maintenance should be, then making payments themselves (this is a free service); and Collect and Pay, a chargeable service which is fully administered by the CMS – collecting and making payments between the two parents – and which includes an enforcement process if payments are not made.

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**Simon Hunter, Director,
Child Maintenance Service**





Growing demand for a unique service

The CMS has seen a remarkable rise in demand in the last few years, handling around 780,000 cases a year which is an increase of almost 40% from 2019. The service is proud to facilitate payments to children totalling over £1bn annually.

One feature that makes the CMS' work unique within the DWP is that it is not a benefit-paying service itself – facilitating payments instead. It operates in a context that requires high degrees of sensitivity given that cases always involve relationship breakdown and sometimes even situations of domestic violence and abuse. Its workload is very administratively focused, in particular because of the high number of change of circumstances notifications it receives (as many as 30,000 per week) when a parent informs the CMS of a change which could have an impact on how much money they could or should receive or pay each month. These changes can be complex and require a case worker to investigate and assess.

It's a challenging brief, one being spearheaded by Simon Hunter, Child Maintenance Service Director, who joined from a private sector background nearly two years ago. "We're very conscious that our whole purpose is to get money to children," Simon says. "Our aim is to run a service that parents on both sides see as fair and appropriate. The goal is to enable our customers to manage their own accounts and ultimately to set up their own family-based arrangements."

The shift to digital

With a track record of digital transformation in other sectors, one of Simon's key focuses has been to significantly move the dial towards digital channels and self-service. The service used to be heavily telephony-based, with initial applications having to be made by phone. This involved a 40-minute interview with an agent asking a series of necessarily very personal questions. This could be difficult for customers as they might struggle to find a safe and private space to make the call, get interrupted halfway through, or generally feel uncomfortable divulging so many details.

Now, the situation is very different as Simon explains. "We have really streamlined the application process and taken it online, following the gov.uk footprint including leading examples like the passport application process. 99% of applications are now made online. You can complete the application in your own time, from almost any device, in a simple and easy process. Via our portal, you get your own account – My Child Maintenance Case – which you can access, view and update at any time."

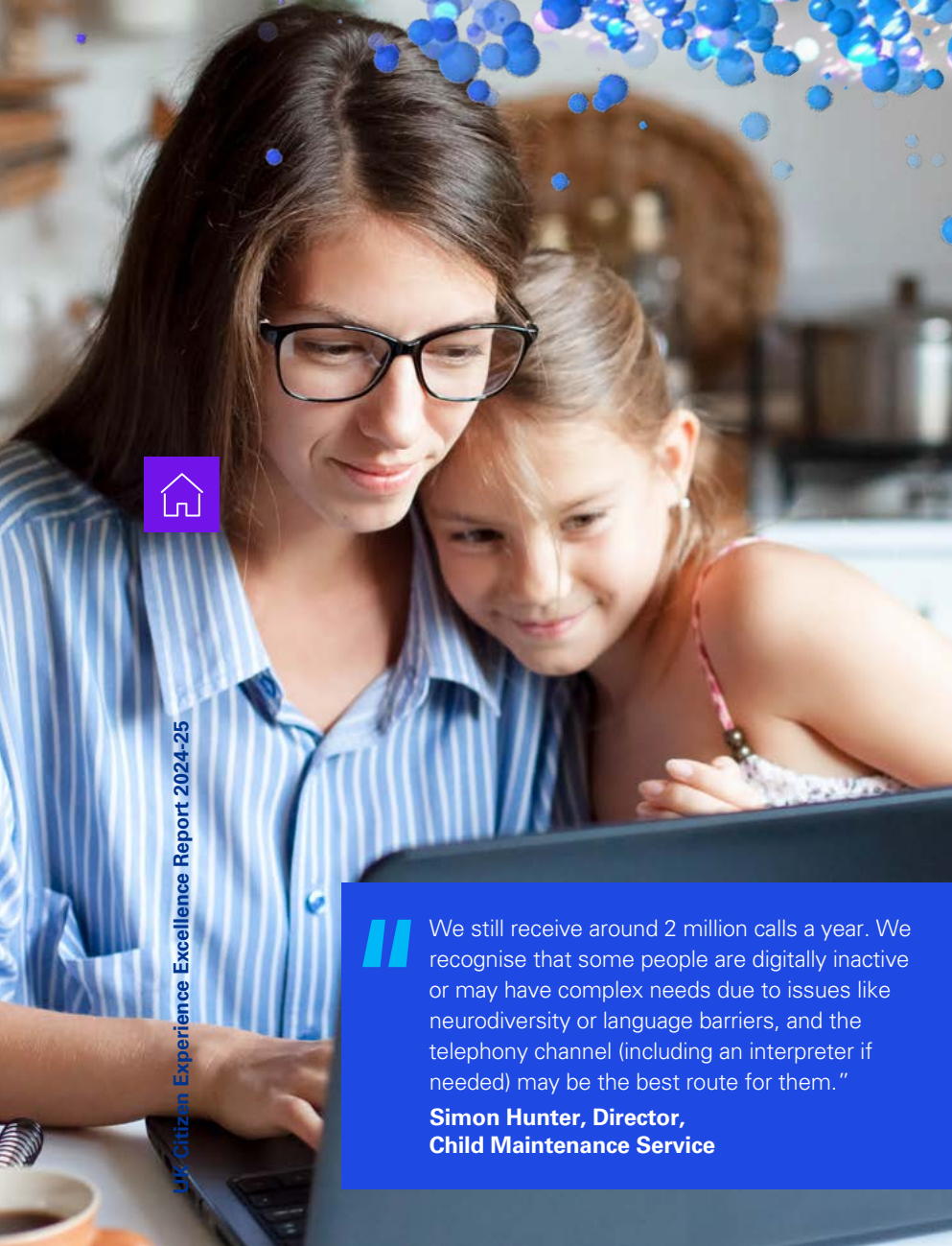
It's not only the initial application that this affects – customers go on to manage significantly more of the ongoing case via the digital route. Around 85% of the CMS' monthly interactions are now online. This is significantly higher than other areas of DWP, which has an ambition of 70% of its interactions to be online by 2030, or indeed most public sector services.

The signs are that this huge shift is working. One key metric for the CMS is to process change of circumstance notifications within 28 days – and it is achieving an 80% success rate in this under the new digital model.



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Staying omnichannel

However, Simon also emphasises that the new approach is not digital at all costs – rather, it’s part of an omnichannel approach. “Phone is still very important,” he says. “We still receive around 2 million calls a year. We recognise that some people are digitally inactive or may have complex needs due to issues like neurodiversity or language barriers, and the telephony channel (including an interpreter if needed) may be the best route for them. Nor can you solve everything online – some issues are complex and our case workers need to delve into them and speak to the parents.”

Nevertheless, the digital-first model is having significant results. Effective demand management through digital channels means that circa 75-80% of phone calls per month are answered within target service levels. Many customers, Simon reflects, only want to engage digitally after all. This leads him to reflect that: “It was less a case of build it and they will come, than they will come and we need to build it!”

Winning hearts and minds

But how has this change been brought about in such a short period of time? Simon emphasises the key importance of driving a cultural change internally – winning hearts and minds, bringing staff who were used to working one way to see that other ways were possible and could improve their work experience.

“I really stressed internally that we needed to get more organised in our approach, with more discipline and prioritisation, in order to create capacity in the system – and that the shift to digital would help us do that,” Simon shares. “To back this up, we provided three hours of digital training to all 4,600 members of staff last summer. We followed that

up with additional training, working on our internal navigable model of the portal so that staff could see the customer journey in practice. Then we had a concerted ‘digital assist’ push last September where on every phone call, unless the customer was digitally excluded, staff had to make them aware that they could manage most things themselves online. Our phone system also has messages promoting online while customers are on hold. We have a high positive abandonment rate from phone to digital as a result.”

All of these elements have helped achieve the digital shift. Staff have embraced the new model. By freeing up more staff time, customer service has improved, Simon says, with administrative changes and updates being actioned faster.

Embracing new technology to prevent escalations

The digital journey doesn’t end there – with a groundbreaking new piece of machine learning technology being launched in March that flags when a customer’s case is likely to break down. This could be for multiple reasons – a change in income levels (loss of overtime hours, for example), loss of employment or other change in personal circumstances. Having trialled the technology over the last three years, it has reached a forecasting accuracy rate nearing 90%.

“This is potentially huge for us,” Simon observes. “The tool can help us get in early, talk to customers and look for solutions to prevent the situation from escalating. Rather than the parent stopping payments altogether for example, we may be able to agree a temporary reduction. When enforcement becomes necessary, there are big costs for us as a service – so this should bring taxpayer benefits as well as to parents and children.”



Top tips

There seems to be much in the CMS story for other public sector leaders to take inspiration from. So what would Simon’s key advice be to others?

“You’ve got to be brave sometimes. Hold your nerve and above all stick to the plan! Bring people with you on the journey, support them with training and communication, and get your big success metrics out there – that inspires people when they recognise that they’re part of it. Embrace the digital era that we’re in – it’s how most customers want to interact.”

Simon also reflects that in many ways, digital is a necessity: “There’s significant pressure on costs and budgets and that’s unlikely to change. You have to get creative and find ways to digitise, automate and do things differently, while ensuring that you’re continuing to support all customers across their individual needs and meeting key service levels.”



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