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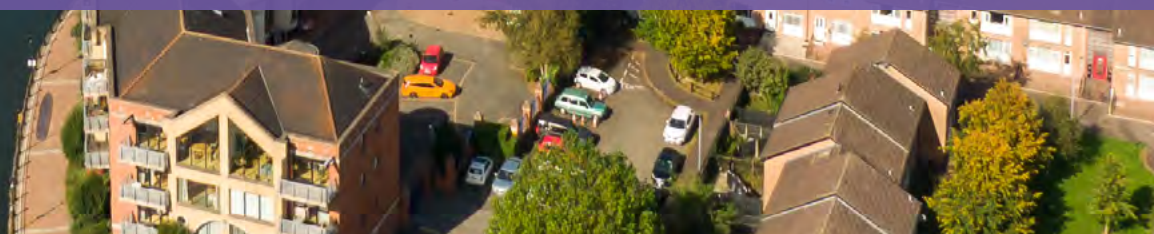
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Northern Ireland Child Maintenance Service

# Annual Report On Decision Making

1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023





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Northern Ireland Child Maintenance Service  
**Annual Report On Decision Making**  
1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

Laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly under Article 76 of the Social Security  
(Northern Ireland) Order 1998 by the Department for Communities.

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# Foreword by the Chairperson of the Standards Committee

## Introduction

The Standards Committee for Northern Ireland was established in 1999.

Primarily, the Committee has the task of providing assurance that the arrangements in place within the Department for Communities (DfC), including Child Maintenance Service (CMS), to monitor decision making and financial accuracy are effective and robust. Secondly, we are required to monitor and report on the standard of decision making. Following from this, we are required to highlight areas of weakness, make recommendations for improvement and report on the impact of measures taken to raise standards. Thirdly, we are required to provide assurance with regard to the mechanisms in place to feed back the results of monitoring and thus promote continuous improvement.

The terms of reference for the Committee is set out in Appendix 4 of this report.

The background to the creation of the Standards Committee is as follows. The Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order transferred responsibility for monitoring the standard of decisions against which there is right of appeal from the Chief Adjudication Officer to the Department (DfC). This responsibility was then delegated to the then Chief Executives of the Social Security Agency (the Agency) and the Child Support Agency, which subsequently became the Child Maintenance Service (CMS)

within the Department for Communities. This rearrangement of responsibilities followed similar changes in Britain when concerns were raised at the credibility of arrangements whereby those responsible for service delivery would also be monitoring the standard of the service provided. To address these concerns the Westminster government provided assurances that further measures be taken to insert an element of independence into the oversight of the quality of decision making with regard to both social security and child support. As a result, in Northern Ireland, the Standards Committee was established with an independent Chair and two independent members. The full membership of the Committee is set out on page 18 of the report.

The Committee discharges its responsibilities in three ways. At its quarterly meetings, the full Committee considers the quarterly reports produced by the Case Monitoring Team (CMT) within CMS, which set out the most recent data on performance in detail and there is on-going discussion of the methodology employed by the CMT. Additionally, there are formal and, where required, informal meetings with the staff of CMS to enable the Committee to secure a full understanding of the work of CMS and matters which may affect decision making performance. Thirdly, we get additional feedback on the standard of the service provided through discussions with the voluntary and community advice sector and the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO).



## **Decision making performance in 2022/2023**

The methodology employed by the CMT to check performance is set out in Chapter 3 of the report. This indicates that, on the advice of statisticians, 664 cases were recommended for selection for checking in 2022/2023. The reduction in numbers from last year (in 2021/2022, 925 cases were recommended for checking) was queried by the Chair. The Chair was assured that the sample size had been reduced this year as the monitoring quota is based upon a confidence level of 95% with a tolerance level of +/- 2.0% and is in keeping with statistical good practice, confirmed by the NIAO.

Chapter 3 also illustrates the rigour and breadth of the monitoring of decisions by the CMT. Performance is assessed using two main yardsticks. The first is the Monetary Value of Error of the most recent decision with regard to the assessment of maintenance. The second relates to the quality of the decision being checked. This is assessed using five criteria in line with the correct application of the law (see 4.4). Decisions are monitored against 2 main criteria (see 3.6).

Chapter 4 identifies the findings for 2022/2023. While decision making accuracy is reported at over 87%, the combined monetary value of error for manual assessments and fully automated financial decisions is 0.3%, well within the target of 1%. It should be pointed out that the current cost of living crisis and the constraints on departmental budgets do take their toll both on staff recruitment and retention and the Committee are keen to monitor how this plays out in the area of decision making and financial accuracy within the department as a whole.

While the MVE for 2022/2023 is decreasing and indicating improved performance, as always, there is room for improvement particularly in decision making accuracy but some issues should be borne in mind in assessing performance. For various reasons, a significant proportion of the work of CMS continues to relate to complex cases and the data above does not fully capture the effort required to reach and maintain the standards achieved. External forces such as changes in the labour market - job loss, zero hours contracts, etc. affect decision making as this can impact on earnings and other related issues.

This is borne out in Appendix 2 which highlights the types of errors found in the decision making process. However, at the annual meeting with CMS and at the quarterly meetings the Standards Committee members continue to be reassured that the internal monitoring methodologies used by the CMS are trend led and responsive to issues as they arise.

## **The broader context**

CMS 2012 has three distinct features. Firstly, there is the provision of impartial information, available to all separating parents, on the options available with regard to child support. Secondly, the options available are; family based arrangements, with no further CMS involvement; Direct Payments where CMS calculate the entitlement of the Receiving Parent but couples decide for themselves how this will be paid; and access to the collection, payment and enforcement service provided by CMS. It should be noted that Receiving Parents can move between these options.

The digital transformation journey has continued through 2022/2023 improving and streamlining the customer experience and

reducing unnecessary customer contact. In Quarter 2, the computer default rate of 40% of a paying parent's gross income was reduced to a more sustainable 27% with staff also engaging with customers to discuss more manageable amounts. This is designed to encourage compliance and so minimise the accrual of arrears. While the department does look to DWP for initiatives to improve the digital journey they do use their position as an autonomous organisation to tweak these initiatives as necessary to best serve the customer in NI. This will continue to be developed with a view to ensuring customer queries are dealt with quickly and telephony pressures are eased.

Once again, our visit to the Child Maintenance Service had to be conducted virtually. The Committee is very keen to get back to face to face meetings in the centres as the virtual meetings limit the level of contact we were able to have with staff. As all staff continue to work either remotely, from the office or a combination of both the Committee are reassured the service has in place a suite of products and assistance available to support remote working and ensure the well-being of staff.

It should be said, however, that the virtual meetings have allowed us to see that staff benefit from the new working systems and the feedback they are receiving from users, in that they see their work delivering good outcomes for children. We would commend them for their efforts and commitments to those who use the service.

Further detail on performance is provided in the following chapters, but I am pleased to provide assurance, at the outset, that the arrangements in place to monitor decision making continue to be robust and note that

this conclusion is supported by the work of the NIAO. I would commend the staff of the CMS for the rigor and quality of their work and whilst there is always room for improvement, I can confirm that the quality of decision making continues to generally be of a good standard.

## Conclusion

I am pleased to be able to present a positive assessment of the work and progress of CMS this year. I am grateful to the staff for their comprehensive presentations and responses to issues raised by the Committee and would like to commend staff for the continuing adjustments they have been required to make.

Finally, I would like to express my particular thanks for the support provided to me by the rest of the members of the Standards Committee, and in particular Ursula O'Hare and Kevin Higgins for sharing their experience with me. Their breadth of knowledge and experience of legislation and policy continues to be an invaluable asset to me and the Standards Committee generally.

Like last year we will continue to ensure the safety of all in light of the COVID-19 recovery, but I think I speak for us all when I say that we look forward to returning to at least some face to face meetings in the future.



**Marie Cavanagh**  
**Chairperson of the Standards Committee**

# Introduction by the Acting Director of CMS

I am pleased to introduce the Annual Report on Decision Making Standards within the Child Maintenance Service (CMS). The purpose of the report is to provide an assurance on the standards of financial accuracy and decision making in CMS.

Financial accuracy of decisions is determined using the Monetary Value of Error (MVE), which provides greater insight to the accuracy of our decisions by reporting the volume and the monetary value of incorrect child maintenance payments. Within CMS, the checking programme delivered by the Case Monitoring Team samples maintenance calculations which required caseworker intervention in 2022/2023. The results of these checks are combined with the maintenance calculations which are fully automated by the CMS 2012 computer system to give an overall level of MVE, representing all the child maintenance assessments completed on our customers' behalf.

This report will show that this year the level of MVE is 0.3%, not only achieving our target of less than 1%, but improving on the performance in 2021/2022 (0.5%). This is an excellent achievement. I would like to record my thanks to staff for their ongoing commitment to deliver a high standard of service to our customers.

As always there is more to do, and we have continued to examine ways to deliver an improved service to customers. During this period, we have continued to develop and improve the CMS 2012 system through system upgrades.

We have continued to promote and enhance our digital services, 'My Child Maintenance Case' and 'Apply Online' which allow customers to manage their account online and at a time which is convenient for them. We also provide a Digital Assist service to support customers who need help to navigate the online service. As part of our 'Digital by Choice' ambition these services will continue to evolve as we identify opportunities to make further improvements to our online services.

Through the ongoing training, development and coaching of our people we will also seek opportunities to reduce the likelihood of error by caseworkers in our maintenance calculations. During the year, the Case Monitoring Team has continued to work closely with operational colleagues to identify areas where additional support would be beneficial and provided targeted coaching.

CMS remains committed to ensuring customers are receiving accurate and timely child maintenance payments and our people have continued to deliver. During the year, CMS supported 20,256 children across Northern Ireland with £25.3m of child maintenance collected and arranged, an increase on the previous year.

Once again, I would like to record my thanks and appreciation to all our people in CMS who have worked determinedly to achieve the results detailed in this report, you have made a real difference to many children and families in Northern Ireland who rely on the service provided by CMS.



Finally, I am grateful for the support and dedication of the Standards Committee chairperson Marie Kavanagh, her colleagues Ursula O'Hare and Kevin Higgins and other Committee members who play an important role in providing independent scrutiny and assurance on the standards of decision making in CMS. I look forward to their continued support in the year ahead as we strive to build on the results achieved in 2022/2023.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gareth Kelly". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'G' and a distinct 'K'.

**Gareth Kelly**  
**Acting Director, Child Maintenance Service**

# 1. Summary

- 1.1 This report provides assurance to the Acting Director of Child Maintenance Service (CMS) that effective monitoring procedures are in place and that this monitoring accurately reflects the Monetary Value of Error and standard of Decision Making within CMS.
- 1.2 In 2019/2020, the Northern Ireland Case Monitoring Team (CMT) moved from checking Cash Value Accuracy (CVA), to checking Monetary Value of Error (MVE). MVE is an estimate of how much child maintenance has been paid incorrectly. This measure assesses the accuracy of the last financial decision taken on the maintenance calculation.
- 1.3 The MVE is expressed as a percentage of the child maintenance received by CMS.
- 1.4 There are essentially two separate elements to the final MVE calculation. The first is an assessment of the accuracy of manual assessments carried out by caseworkers. The accuracy of these manual assessments is checked by CMT.

The second element is the inclusion of the automated assessments which the system carries out.

- 1.5 The inclusion of both manual and automated assessments ensures that the overall MVE figure is reflective of all assessments made by CMS on behalf of our clients.
- 1.6 The target for the 2022/2023 monitoring year was to achieve a combined MVE level of < 1% for the CMS 2012 Scheme. The target focuses upon the accuracy in monetary terms of the last maintenance calculation CMS made on a case and is decided by the examination of the pre-determined statistically valid sample of maintenance calculations which required caseworker intervention.

## MVE Results

- 1.7 The MVE on the CMS 2012 Scheme achieved for this monitoring year was 0.3%.

Target MVE	MVE	Result
<1%	0.3%	Achieved

## 2. Decision Making Process

- 2.1 Decision Makers calculate the amount of maintenance based on the Child Support legislation – the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 and the Child Support Maintenance Calculation Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012. Decision Makers are required to consider evidence provided by both the Receiving Parent and the Paying Parent to establish the amount of maintenance required to maintain the qualifying children.
- 2.2 Decision Makers are required to obtain and document sufficient evidence to support their decisions. It is essential that all avenues be explored to ensure that every aspect of the decision has been investigated. In all cases this information is processed by the Siebel computer system which supports the CMS 2012 Scheme.
- 2.3 When an initial maintenance calculation has been made, the Decision Maker can reconsider their decision by way of a supersession to take account of a change of circumstance or a Mandatory Reconsideration to correct an error.
- 2.4 CMS will support clients whether they choose either the Collect and Pay or the Direct Pay service. The assessment service includes an automatic Annual Review; in addition to this either client can report various changes throughout the lifespan of the case and each decision made on the CMS 2012 system can be subject to a Mandatory Reconsideration, thus ensuring that either client can challenge any decision made by CMS. The Decision Maker uses Siebel to set up accounts and payment schedules. These schedules take into account the Paying Parent’s current liability as well as any underpayment or overpayment as a result of the new assessment.

## 3. Assurance

- 3.1 During the reporting year 2022/2023, 664 maintenance calculations which required caseworker (manual) intervention were randomly selected for checking. The process used to derive this sample is set out below and ensures that a statistically valid sample of manual maintenance calculations are checked to provide assurance on the overall level of MVE.
- 3.2 The total number of cases selected for checking is calculated for CMS by Professional Services Unit (PSU), who are part of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. For the CMS 2012 Scheme, this sample size is based on a confidence level of 95% with a tolerance level of +/- 2.0%. This means that the actual level of MVE could be up to 2.0% greater or less than the accuracy rate found by the case monitors.
- 3.3 All maintenance calculations requiring caseworker intervention selected by the CMT for assurance are taken from scans provided to CMT by a third party (Business Analytics Unit) on a monthly basis throughout the year. The maintenance calculations are identified by completed Service Requests (SRs). The lists provided by BAU are stratified by type of SR. This additional stratification ensures the sample is more representative of all maintenance calculations than it would likely have been if the sample was chosen entirely at random.
- 3.4 Each month, CMT is required to check around 55 maintenance calculations requiring caseworker intervention, selected from the SRs. A random number generator is used to select the final SR selections for checking from the lists provided by BAU. This ensures that all SRs have an equal chance of being checked.
- 3.5 Using this method provides a robust and independent assurance on the selection process.
- 3.6 Maintenance calculations are monitored against 2 main criteria:
- Assurance on the monetary value of the last maintenance calculation made by caseworker intervention is accurate in line with the requirements in the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) target;
  - Assurance on the quality of the decision making process.
- 3.7 The findings of the CMT form the basis of monthly reports to operational managers. CMT also provide quarterly reports to the Standards Committee. These reports detail performance against the target, providing an analysis of results and identifying any trends and issues.

## 4. Monitoring Findings For CMS 2012 Scheme

- 4.1 The CMT's findings for CMS 2012 in relation to MVE and Decision Making are presented in this section of the report.

### Monetary Value of Error

- 4.2 Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023 the CMT monitored 664 CMS 2012 decisions. The monitoring found that for 622 of the maintenance calculations requiring caseworker interventions the monetary value was correct and for 42 the value was incorrect. For each of the incorrect maintenance calculations, CMT determined by how much money the maintenance calculation was incorrect i.e., the monetary value of the error. The main errors affecting MVE and accounting for 85% of MVE errors resulted from the use of incorrect effective dates and from income errors. The MVE for caseworker interventions was 1.0%. Appendix 1 refers.
- 4.3 The MVE for manual assessments is combined with the proportions of fully automated maintenance calculations, based on the monetary liability values, stratified by SR category, to give the overall level of MVE in 2022/2023. The combined level of MVE in 2022/2023 is 0.3%.

### Decision Making Accuracy

- 4.4 The same sample of 664 decisions was also monitored for decision making accuracy. Where a case is found to have a decision making inaccuracy, it does not necessarily follow that the last decision is financially inaccurate. The case monitors raised a decision making comment under the following categories:
- There is insufficient evidence to support the decision;
  - The incorrect law is applied, or the law is applied incorrectly;
  - The Decision Maker makes a wrong finding of fact;
  - There is an incorrect calculation;
  - The record of decision/notification is incomplete or inaccurate.
- 4.5 Of the 664 decisions monitored, 85 were found to have had decision making errors. Decision making accuracy is therefore reported as 87.2% accurate.
- Appendix 2 provides an analysis of the decision making comments mentioned above. Within a decision there could be more than one decision making comment.



## Appendix 1

# CMS 2012 Scheme MVE (Caseworker Intervention)

Monetary Value of Error (MVE)		Checked		Errors		
		Volume	Value	Volume	Value	% Value
SR065	Initial	41	£2,201.36	4	£29.62	1.3%
SR066	Correction/Revision	17	£1,098.43	1	£25.31	2.3%
SR067	Change Benefit Details	194	£3,498.04	6	£4.33	0.1%
	Income & Household	374	£18,134.19	29	£187.96	1.0%
	Case Closure	16	£446.81	0	£0.00	0.0%
	<b>SR067 Total</b>	<b>584</b>	<b>£22,079.04</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>£192.29</b>	<b>0.9%</b>
SR068	Change Client Data (Variation)	13	£857.66	2	£9.17	1.1%
SR069	Additional Case	5	£275.97	0	£0.00	0.0%
SR070	Annual Review	4	£209.52	0	£0.00	0.0%
<b>Overall Total</b>		<b>664</b>	<b>£26,721.98</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>£256.39</b>	<b>1.0%</b>

## Appendix 2

# CMS 2012 Scheme Maintenance Assessment Comments

This table records the type of errors found in the decision making process:

Maintenance Calculation Comments						
1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023						
	A	B	C	D	E	Total
	Insufficient Evidence on Which to Decide	Incorrect Law Applied / Law Applied Incorrectly	Wrong Finding of Fact / Incorrect Interpretation of Fact	Incorrectly Calculated	Record of Decision / Notification is Incomplete or Inaccurate	
Jurisdiction	0	0	0	0	0	0
Effective Date	0	12	5	9	0	26
Shared Care	3	0	0	3	8	14
Earnings – Other	1	0	2	1	8	12
Earnings – Calculation	1	7	0	2	3	13
Earnings – Bonus	1	0	0	1	0	2
Pension Contributions	0	0	1	1	0	2
Benefit Income	0	0	0	0	1	1
Other Income	1	0	1	2	3	7
Notifications	0	0	0	0	0	0
Variations	2	0	3	2	0	7
QC/ROC/CIFBA*	2	1	1	3	3	10
Other	3	1	2	0	1	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>101</b>

\*QC/ROC/CIFBA Qualifying Child(ren)/Relevant Other Child(ren)/Child in Family Based Arrangement  
 Note – There could be more than 1 error on a case. There were 85 cases with errors.

## Appendix 3

# The Process of Decision Making

As part of the decision making process there are different steps which the individual Decision Maker must consider.

Errors in following the Decision Making process result in a decision making comment being included but do not necessarily impact on the outcome decision.

### Comments include:

- Identifying that an assessment needs to be considered;
- Calculating the effective date of the assessment;
- Gathering the evidence;
- Clarifying the evidence;
- Deciding which evidence to use;
- Recording the evidence onto the computer system;
- Adjudicating.

### Elements taken into account when calculating a Maintenance Calculation

- Effective date of liability;
- Household Members;
- Earned Income – Employed, Self Employed, Occupational or Personal Pensions;
- Benefit Income;
- Shared Care of the Qualifying Child(ren);
- Relevant other children in household;
- Child in Family Based Arrangement;
- Other Child Maintenance Agreements;
- Variations – Additional Income and Special Expenses.

## Appendix 4

# Terms of Reference for the Standards Committee

1. The Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 removed the distinction between adjudication decisions made by adjudication officers and departmental decisions and introduced single status decision makers. This removed the statutory requirement for a Chief Adjudication Officer and, by default, their responsibility for reporting on the standard of adjudication.
2. In addition to being responsible for the delivery of the decision making process and the standard of decisions made, the Department was made responsible for reporting on the standard of decisions against which there is a right of appeal. These responsibilities were delegated to the Chief Executives of the Social Security Agency (“Agency”) and the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency. From 1 April 2008 the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency became a division within the Department for Social Development called the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division and was later renamed Child Maintenance Service (“CMS”) from 1 April 2013. In May 2016, following the reduction in Northern Ireland’s Departments from 12 to 9, both the Agency and CMS functions have been transferred to the Department for Communities under Work and Inclusion Group. CMS is now under the Supporting People Group.
3. The responsibility for reporting on standards requires the Deputy Secretary of Supporting People Group to have programmes in place to determine the standards which are to be reported. It has been recognised however, that to enhance this programme and its credibility and transparency with the public, some independent oversight of the arrangements is necessary. Accordingly, a Joint (Northern Ireland) Standards Committee has been appointed with an independent Chairperson, together with two other Independent Members, and having terms of reference agreed by the Deputy Secretary.
4. The Standards Committee will have an advisory rather than executive role. Its objectives will be to:
  - provide assurance to the Deputy Secretary of Supporting People Group that effective decision making checking procedures are in place;
  - to confirm legislation is properly applied;
  - to monitor and report performance against quality targets;
  - identify common trends relating to the quality of decision making in Supporting People Group and to highlight those areas where improvement is needed;
  - make specific recommendations on any area considered appropriate;

- provide assurance to the Deputy Secretary of Supporting People Group that mechanisms are in place to feedback results to the Department to enable continuous improvement;
  - report to the Deputy Secretary of Supporting People Group on the operation of the decision making process and where necessary to make recommendations for changes to it. The Deputy Secretary should be free to meet the Chairperson informally and discuss issues that may arise during the year;
  - provide the Deputy Secretary of Supporting People Group with an annual assurance in the form of reports on the quality of decision making in Supporting People Group and such other reports as the Deputy Secretary or the Standards Committee considers appropriate;
  - provide assurance on the quality of decision making with the results of financial accuracy.
5. Standards Committee meetings will be held 4 times yearly to coincide with the reporting programmes and minutes will be taken and agreed by the Committee members.
  6. An agenda will be prepared in advance of each meeting and circulated to the Committee Chairperson for consideration.

Committee Membership	
<b>Marie Cavanagh</b>	Independent Chairperson
<b>Kevin Higgins</b>	Independent Member
<b>Ursula O'Hare</b>	Independent Member
<b>Leo McLaughlin</b>	Director of Pensions, Disability and Benefit Security & Debt, Department for Communities
<b>Julie Nelson</b>	Assistant Director of Benefit Security & Debt, Department for Communities
<b>Ros Agnew</b>	Acting Deputy Director, Child Maintenance Service, Department for Communities
<b>Gary Curran</b>	Head of Internal Audit, Department for Communities



## Appendix 5

# Glossary

<b>Decision Maker</b>	The officer making decisions on behalf of the Department.
<b>Decision Making</b>	The process of applying the child support legislation and guidance to evidence supplied by clients.
<b>Insufficient Evidence</b>	When a decision is made without gathering all the evidence required to make a comprehensive decision.
<b>Last Decision</b>	The last assessment completed on the case selected for checking, taken from a random sample.
<b>Maintenance Calculation</b>	Liability calculated under the CMS 2012 Scheme.
<b>Paying Parent</b>	A parent who has a liability to maintain a Receiving Parent's child(ren) but who lives apart from the Receiving Parent.
<b>Receiving Parent</b>	A parent who is the primary carer of the qualifying child(ren).
<b>Mandatory Reconsideration</b>	A decision is revised where it is changed from the date of the original decision as a consequence of action or application arising within the acceptable period of revision.
<b>Supersession</b>	A decision is superseded where there is a relevant change of circumstances changing the original decision from a later date.
<b>Variation</b>	Where a parent has exceptional circumstances not covered by the basic procedures of the CMS 2012 Scheme.
<b>CMS 2012</b>	Scheme introduced in 2012 to replace the 1993 and 2003 Schemes.

