



# Long-term separated parents: developing support to encourage child maintenance arrangements

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This research explored the barriers which may inhibit long-term separated parents from putting a child maintenance arrangement in place and their support needs to enable them to put in place an effective arrangement.

## Research methodology

The findings detailed in this report are from research conducted amongst long-term separated parents living in London, Birmingham, Newcastle and Bristol in 2014. Long-term separated parents are those who have split with the parent of their child(ren) for two years or more.

The sample included Child Support Agency (CSA) clients and Child Maintenance (CM) Options customers, including some who had a lapsed family-based arrangement (FBA).

The research was conducted in two stages. Stage One examined the barriers that inhibited longer-term separated parents from working together and putting a family-based or other effective arrangement in place and explored the extent to which case closure will affect their child maintenance decisions. This stage was comprised of 11 qualitative mini-groups and 22 depth interviews. Stage Two tested new propositions for support designed to overcome barriers and encourage child maintenance

arrangements and provide recommendations for improvement. This stage comprised six qualitative mini-groups, two paired depths and two depth interviews. All fieldwork in this stage was reconvened with parents from Stage One.

All research participants were recruited via contact lists provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and had provided consent for their details to be used for research.

## Report findings

### View of separated parents

Parents with a range of child maintenance payment methods (including lapsed FBAs, and CSA arrangements: Maintenance Direct and Collection Service), levels of child maintenance compliance and length of separation were represented across the research. Separate focus groups and paired depths were conducted amongst both parents with care (PWCs) and non-resident parents NRPs).

When discussing options for child maintenance, PWCs tended to focus on retaining a sense of stability, independence and control. CSA clients achieved this via their statutory arrangement, whereas CM Options customers whose maintenance arrangements varied from no arrangement to receiving regular maintenance

via a FBA chose to maintain control by avoiding asking for more maintenance from their co-parent. NRPs tended to focus on parental access and parental involvement, and valued flexibility as well as control in relation to maintenance arrangements.

For both PWCs and NRPs, anger and frustration remained for many, long after separating from their ex-partners. However, some had mutual acceptance and were able to collaborate in their parenting duties. Fluctuation in relationship quality still occurred long after separation, and the presence of a new partner or children for either party were the key triggers of conflict between co-parents.

### **Current and past child maintenance arrangements**

A complex picture emerged during the research, with parents holding a wide range of arrangements including statutory arrangements, informal FBAs, and no arrangement. It became clear that arrangements, particularly informal FBAs, were subject to disruption and change. Long-term separated parents had often experienced several phases of arrangements, moving between informal and statutory arrangements.

Parents described the role of the statutory system in their arrangements as being one which met their basic needs. The key role of the statutory system was to meet their need for clarity and security in their maintenance arrangements, and to act as an intermediary between parents who did not wish to have contact. However, most parents interviewed for this study would prefer to move beyond these basic needs and work towards increased collaboration with their co-parent. This was seen as the key advantage of a FBA, valued by all parents, as it was likely to be of benefit to their children.

### **Responses to changes in the statutory system**

Parents tended to react with surprise and dismay when they received the information about case closure, as it made them fear losing the security of their existing maintenance arrangement. PWCs in particular were fearful of change and disruption to their existing arrangement, and the impact on their own finances and ultimately on their child(ren).

There was a general assumption that the new system would work similarly to their current arrangement, with few expecting flexibility or collaboration with their co-partners.

### **Parents' capacity to build and sustain a family-based arrangement**

The discussion of case closure focused on parents' plans following case closure, and on their potential to set up a FBA in the future. Parents who did not already have a FBA in place tended to have a variety of concerns about this type of arrangement, and the intensity of these concerns varied between parents. Parents focused on the basic need for security and clarity in their child maintenance arrangements, and if they feared that these would not be met, they were less likely to engage with more aspirational aspects of a FBA, such as flexibility and collaboration between co-parents. Relationship quality was the key factor driving parents' capacity to build and sustain a FBA, and this varied widely between parents.

### **Family-based arrangement support needs**

The extent and nature of support required varied between parents. Those with the poorest relationships with their co-parent had the most intense support needs. Key support needs were for measures that would help parents feel secure in their arrangement, and to feel that they had an arrangement which both parties could clearly

understand. Once these needs had been met, they were interested in measures which would support them to find flexibility, conflict resolution and collaboration. The timing of FBA support was thought to be crucial. At times of conflict in the co-parent relationship, in the experience of separated parents, prevention tended to be more effective than attempting to resolve conflict after it had taken root.

## Proposition testing

The findings from Stage 1 led to the development of a series of propositions which were tested in the Stage 2 research. Propositions took the form of a set of six ideas for interventions designed to support parents to set up and maintain a successful maintenance agreement following case closure.

Stage 2 research revealed that experience plays a key role in setting expectations from the new system. Negative experience of the CSA was transferred to perceptions of the new system. Parents were unaware of CM Options and tended to assume it would offer a similar style of support to the CSA. This resulted in stress and worry, which in turn led to fears about the transition to the new system, and an increased risk of reversion to the statutory scheme, or exiting the system. Communications could play a role in alleviating these fears. The six propositions tested during Stage 2 were as follows:

- **Communicating features and benefits of Direct Pay:** This had a broad appeal, and parents thought they would be likely to take up this option. The key benefit was thought to be the combination of parental collaboration that was offered, for example, in arranging payments; balanced with the security offered by the legal backing.

- **Dealing with key triggers of conflict via the CM Options Service, and via additional content on the FBA form:** This received polarised responses. The options provided tended to lack the intensity of support that parents thought would be required in a period of conflict. As parents were not aware of the support offered by CM Options, they lacked any positive reason to contact the service during times of conflict, and could not envisage doing so, nor the benefits of this. As well as the lack of a positive trigger to contacting CM Options, there were barriers to contacting the service for those who equated it with the CSA.
- **Helping customers make contact with ex-partners via a tracing service:** This had a limited relevance as parents already knew the whereabouts of their co-parent and views were neutral/positive. A further proposition, a making-contact letter sent from one co-parent to the other in which an invitation was made to set up a FBA, received a similar response. This was because parents found it difficult to envisage a letter sent from them to their co-parent on the topic of maintenance.
- **Virtual Meeting Space: an opportunity for parents to talk about child maintenance on the telephone or online.** Responses to the concept depended on the nature of the space with a strong preference for a face-to-face meeting. Mediation was thought to be desirable, but this was often equated with support with facilitation rather than trained counselling or arbitration. The principle of supported communication was well liked.

- **Amendments to the family-based arrangement form:** Parents' views of the usefulness of the form depended on the quality of the co-parent relationship. Those who thought it would be useful focused on the need for a balance between financial and non-financial collaboration. There was a strong negative reaction from those in the most difficult co-parent situations and this highlighted the need for targeting of interventions.
- **Free impartial information and support on options for putting in place child maintenance via CM Options:** This was generally well received, although there was little or no experience or awareness that CM Options already offer this. Positive reception was based on an understanding that CM is meant to support collaboration. Negative perceptions based on CSA heritage must be overcome, especially for CSA customers going through the case closure process. Parents also tended to have the misconception that CM Options was not available to them, and thought that the service was only available to those recently separated from their partner.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 910219 99 7. Research Report 904. August 2015).

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