

# Summary: Survey of Separated Parents

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## About the research

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has an objective to provide a Child Maintenance system that supports separated parents to work together to set up family-based child maintenance arrangements and where this is not possible, provide access to an effective and efficient Child Maintenance Service to ensure separated parents contribute towards the upkeep of their children.

DWP commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake this research with separated parents to better understand their views, support needs and experiences of agreeing a child maintenance arrangement, their relationships and use of DWP services and other support services. This research complements existing literature, survey and administrative data analyses to help the Department identify ways to provide effective and efficient support for separated families. This research involved telephone and online interviews in March 2021 with 2,489 separated parents, including 1,555 parents with care (PWCs) and 934 non-resident parents (NRPs), to obtain a representative view.

## Insights into arrangements for child support and care

The survey explored the types of support arrangements that separated parents had in place, either verbally or in writing, even if these arrangements were not upheld in practice. **Most parents had arrangements for financial support**, though there were differences in reporting between PWCs (48%) – the primary care-givers – and NRPs (81%). Arrangements typically included regular payments or via paying for goods and services that the child needed. In comparison, 37% of PWCs and 64% of NRPs reported having arrangements for non-financial care, such as overnight stays or school pick-ups. Four in ten (40%) had arrangements for both (24% of PWCs and 58% of NRPs). Most of these arrangements were informal.

**Affordability was a key barrier** to having arrangements for financial support. Four in ten (42%) parents who did not provide/receive financial support said that this was because the NRP could not afford it. Other reasons included that: the NRP provided other forms of support instead (22%), the NRP was not interested or willing to provide financial support (20%), or that the PWC did not want to receive financial support from the NRP (13%).

The **quality of parental relationships** was also key to having arrangements for both types of care. Parents with more amicable relationships and less conflict were more likely to have arrangements that worked for them, typically through a Family Based Arrangement (FBA). On the other hand, parents with strained relationships and more

conflict were more likely to not have arrangements, or to rely on the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) to make arrangements.

A quarter of parents (26%) did not have agreements for support. Around two in five (38%) of these parents wanted to make arrangements but a greater proportion did not (47%).

## **The Child Maintenance Service**

The CMS is available to parents who have not been able to reach a private arrangement about how their child's living costs will be paid. A quarter of parents (27%) had used the CMS to make arrangements for financial support. CMS use was common among parents who did not have contact with each other (56%) and those with high conflict (34%). These parents also had more complex circumstances or were more financially constrained (i.e. have a lower household income). For example, a third (34%) of parents of children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) had used the CMS compared to 25% without. These findings suggest that the CMS provided support to parents who may otherwise have been without an agreement in place.

## **Complying with financial agreements**

**NRPs were largely compliant** with upholding financial agreements. Two-thirds (65%, including 64% of PWCs and 66% of NRPs) paid all or most of the money that was agreed or calculated. However, four in ten (39%) did not provide all of the money that was agreed. PWCs were more likely to report that the NRP did not pay all of the money agreed (43% compared to 37% of NRPs). Lack of compliance was higher among parents that did not want support arrangements, rather than among parents that wanted different arrangements.

**Affordability was a key contributor to non-compliance.** Those on lower household incomes were more likely to report that the NRP did not pay all of the money. Given the challenges around this, parents most wanted financial support (such as job income or security, 27%) or agreement on the amount of money actually needed (22%) to help the NRP comply with their agreements. In addition, they wanted support to have a better relationship with one another (19%), to have more or better-quality contact with the child (18%), and to have a clearer view on how the money was being spent (18%). Only two percent said that there was no support that could encourage the NRP to comply.

## **Parental conflict, relationships and parental care**

Three in ten parents (28%) did not have any contact with the other parent of their child. These parents had the most complex circumstances and strained relationships. For example, over half (55%) of NRPs who did not have contact with the other parent, also never saw their child, compared to seven percent where the parents had contact with each other. Parents that did not have any contact with each other were also more likely to be parents of children with SEND (36% compared to 26% without)

and to have long-term health conditions or disabilities themselves (34% compared to 26% without).

Among parents who did have contact with each other, **conflict was a barrier** to being able to make child maintenance arrangements. Parents with high levels of conflict were more likely to report that they did not have any arrangements for support with the other parent, or to have arrangements for financial support only, while those with low conflict were more likely to report having arrangements for both financial and non-financial care.

Parents with low conflict were also more likely to make joint decisions on important childcare matters, and to have FBAs.

Most often, NRPs saw their child more than once a week (32%). This included 12% of parents who reported that the NRP saw their child three times a week on average. Strained relationships and conflict were key barriers to the NRP having more contact with their child. Two in five (40%) parents said that a difficult relationship with the other parent prevented the NRP from having more child contact, and a third (32%) felt the NRP did not want to have (or felt the PWC did not want the NRP to have) more child contact. Half (51%) of CMS users and parents that did not have contact felt that difficult relationships were a barrier.

## **Support for separated families**

Over four in ten (43%) parents reported receiving non-financial support from family members, and a quarter (25%) reported receiving financial support. **PWCs were more likely to benefit** from this. However, the majority of NRPs (61%) and two in five PWCs (40%) reported they received no support at all from their extended families.

Individuals who may be more in need of support were less likely to receive such support from family members. For example, over half (56%) of parents with a household income below £10,000 said they did not receive any support, compared to 45% of those with a household income of £50,000 or more. Similarly, parents with long-term health conditions or disabilities were more likely to not be receiving any support (55% compared to 48% without). The findings highlighted an additional need for financial and non-financial support among more vulnerable parents.

The survey explored whether parents had used seven different types of support services. The most commonly used service was the Child Maintenance online calculator, which was used by 41% of PWCs and 42% of NRPs. Other services that parents had used included: a lawyer or solicitor (38% of PWCs and 40% of NRPs), the Child Maintenance Options service (38% of PWCs and 24% of NRPs), and family courts (23% of PWCs and 27% of NRPs). Parents were less likely to have used enforcement measures by the CMS (33% of PWCs and 13% per cent of NRPs that were also CMS users) and mediators or relationship support (17% of PWCs and 24% of NRPs).

Among users, support offered by charities or public organisations was most likely to be reported as useful compared to the other support services. Parents who were

happy with their support arrangements were highly likely to have found this service useful (81%).

A quarter of PWCs (23%) and NRPs (27%) had used family courts. As might be expected, use was higher among parents with strained relationships, such as those with high conflict (32% compared to 12% with low conflict) or no contact with each other (39%), and where the NRP never saw their child (36%). Use was also higher among parents with complex circumstances, including parents of children with SEND (33% compared to 22% without). Most parents who used family courts (78%) did this to make decisions about how they would raise their child, including on parenting, contact and residence arrangements.

Overall, three in ten parents (30%) had not used any of the seven support services, primarily because they did not need additional support (58%). This was a common response among parents with more amicable relationships (such as 74% with low conflict), which was common to parents with an FBA. One in five parents (22%) said they did not access support because they were **unsure about what was available** to them and where they could find this. This was a particular problem for CMS users (46% compared to 16% with an FBA), who were more in need of external support to make effective child maintenance arrangements. Support provided by charities and voluntary organisations was felt to be the most useful.

Another barrier was affordability. One in seven parents (14%) said they did not access support because they could not afford it. This was higher among CMS users.

## Impact of separation

Two in five PWCs (41%) and three in ten NRPs (30%) reported that their ability to financially support their child had improved since separating. Parents who had a higher household income were more likely to report that they were better able to support their child financially following their separation, while parents with a lower household income were more likely to report that they were less able to support their child. Over half of parents (57%) reported that they had accessed at least one type of benefit as a result of their separation. PWCs were more likely (82%) than NRPs (31%) to report this, which is expected given PWCs are typically entitled to higher benefits as the primary caregiver. Accessing benefits was more common among parents that did not have contact with each other (63%) and among parents without arrangements for support (75%). It was also common among parents that used the CMS (59%) compared to those with an FBA (43%).

PWCs reported better outcomes than NRPs on factors like wellbeing. For example, six in ten PWCs (59%) and four in ten NRPs (40%) felt their wellbeing had improved since the separation,

Parents were mixed in their views on whether their child's mental health and wellbeing had improved or worsened since the separation. Three in ten (29%) reported it had got better, two in ten (20%) said worse, but over a third (37%) reported that there was no change. However, parents of children with SEND reported better outcomes for child's wellbeing.

## **Conclusions**

The research found that most parents have arrangements for financial and/or non-financial support. Income (and therefore affordability) is a key factor in parents' decision-making about arrangements. It is also the main reason why some NRPs report not complying with their financial arrangements. In these situations, both parents have expressed a desire for support to help the NRP to achieve financial security and stability.

Conflict is a key factor in determining the quality of parental relationships (and linked to this is how often the NRP sees their child) and in parents' ability to make child maintenance arrangements. Parents who jointly make decisions on matters about their child are less likely to have conflict, and more likely to have FBAs. It might be possible that supporting parents to resolve or minimise conflict could help more parents to reach FBAs. However, the existence of conflict between parents, and the lack of contact between some parents who have never had a relationship, means the CMS is performing an important role for parents who may otherwise be without any financial arrangement.

There are barriers to parents' access of support services including affordability and lack of awareness. Support offered by charities and voluntary organisation is felt to be most useful.