



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions



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

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August 2015

Research Report No 904

A report of research carried out by GfK NOP on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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First published 2015.

ISBN 978 1 910219 99 7

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# Summary

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.

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.

Parents with a wide range of child maintenance arrangements, compliance and length of separation shared their views. There was representation from both non resident parents (NRPs) and parents with care (PWCs). The sample included Child Support Agency (CSA) clients and Child Maintenance (CM) Options customers, including some who had a lapsed family-based arrangement.

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. This stage also explored the extent to which case closure will affect their child maintenance decisions. Stage Two used findings from Stage One to develop and then test new propositions for support. These were designed to overcome barriers and encourage child maintenance arrangements. Stage Two provided feedback and recommendations for improvement of these propositions.

A number of priorities emerged from the research for future communications and support for long-term separated parents during the transition to the new system. These included the promotion of CM Options, clarification of fees, timeliness and support that was targeted appropriately. Parents also valued the concepts of support from both an intermediary such as a trained facilitator and an impartial CM Options service providing high quality information and support.

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# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the parents who gave freely of their time to take part in this study and who shared their personal views and experiences with us. This study was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and we are grateful to all those at DWP who contributed to and supported the study.

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# Glossary of terms

<b>Child Maintenance Options</b>	An impartial information and support service started in 2008 to help parents make decisions about child maintenance arrangements.
<b>Child Support Agency</b>	A government agency responsible for the assessment and collection of compulsory child maintenance payments.
<b>Depth interview</b>	An individual interview with a single participant.
<b>Direct Pay</b>	An arrangement where the Child Maintenance Service calculates the amount of child maintenance to be paid. Both parents agree between themselves when and how the payments are made. There is a one-off application fee.
<b>Family-based arrangement</b>	An arrangement, which both the non-resident parent and parent with care have come to by themselves without involving the Child Support Agency.
<b>Family-based arrangement form</b>	A form produced by DWP to allow parents to write down their decisions relating to their family-based arrangement.
<b>Long-term separated</b>	Long-term separated parents are those who have split with the parent of their child/ren for two years or more
<b>Mini-group</b>	A group discussion involving three to six participants and lasting up to 90 minutes in length.
<b>Non-resident parent</b>	The parent who lives in a separate household from the child/ren. In this report, the term non-resident parent may refer to either a Child Support Agency client or Child Maintenance Options customer.
<b>Parent with care</b>	The parent who lives in the same household as the child/ren for whom maintenance has been applied for/or is being paid. In this report, the term parent with care may refer to either a Child Support Agency client or Child Maintenance Options customer.
<b>Paired depth interview</b>	An interview conducted with two participants.
<b>Statutory arrangement</b>	A maintenance arrangement which is set up with the help of the courts or Child Support Agency to ensure separated parents set-up appropriate support for their child in line with their income.

# List of abbreviations

<b>CM Options</b>	Child Maintenance Options
<b>CSA</b>	Child Support Agency
<b>DWP</b>	Department for Work and Pensions
<b>FBA</b>	Family-based arrangement
<b>LTS</b>	Long-term separated
<b>NRP</b>	Non-resident parent
<b>PwC</b>	PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP
<b>PWC</b>	Parent with care

# Executive summary

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.

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 family-based arrangements (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,

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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. 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 FBA 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.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is responsible for the child maintenance system in Great Britain. The DWP operates the statutory child maintenance scheme (administered by the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) and the Child Support Agency (CSA)) and funds Child Maintenance Options (CM Options). CM Options is a national service which has a responsibility to provide information and support to separated and separating parents (and third parties), on child maintenance issues.

In late 2012 DWP launched the new child maintenance system designed to support the Government's goals for supporting and strengthening families. Part of these goals was to ensure that, where necessary, a strong and effective statutory service remained an accessible and affordable option for those who needed it. To this end the introduction of a new statutory CMS for parents who are not able to make their own arrangements was required. A programme of work began in summer 2014 that will, eventually, see this service replace the current CSA. Existing CSA clients will be told their current CSA case will close and they must make a decision to re-apply to the new CMS or make their own independent arrangement.

*Supporting separated families; securing children's futures*, The 2012 Child Maintenance Command Paper, sets out the Government's vision for the new child maintenance landscape with a strong focus on collaborative family-based arrangements (FBAs) between separated parents which are in the best interests of children.

At the heart of the Government's mandate is its objective to encourage parents to see child maintenance within the wider scope of separation and to become an issue to be agreed upon rather than a roadblock to collaboration. Government policy is to encourage and support separated parents to make their own flexible FBA where this is appropriate.

Sir David Henshaw's 2006 report *Recovering Child Support; Routes To Responsibility* made clear that entrenched societal behaviours that make the statutory service a default option for many parents present one of the greatest challenges to collaboration. He proposed a series of service charges to act as incentives to parents to consider working together in the best interest of their children rather than defaulting into an expensive statutory solution. The Government agreed with Sir David's recommendations and as such introduced an array of fees and charges in summer 2014 to provide a financial incentive for parents to consider making their own child maintenance arrangements if possible. The levels of fees were heavily consulted on and do not represent the actual costs of the services provided, the statutory scheme remains an affordable and accessible option for those who require it. These charges also do not apply to current CSA clients, only to new CMS clients.

From summer 2014 existing CSA clients were contacted to advise them that their cases will be closed. The closure programme is being performed over a number of years in a sensible phased approach ensuring the minimum possible disruption to maintenance. The CM Options Service will start to receive calls from CSA clients whose case is closing and the role of the service will be to explain the available options for future management including promoting FBAs where appropriate. CM Options will support CSA clients as well as new applicants to overcome the barriers they may face when developing their own arrangements,

with tools, messages and guides to respond to their different needs. However, there will remain an effective statutory service for those who require it.

## **1.2 Objectives**

The overarching objective of this research was to explore the experiences of long-term separated parents and to understand their needs to enable them to put in place an effective child maintenance arrangement. The research was split into two stages. Stage 1 examined the barriers that inhibited longer-term separated parents from working together and putting a family-based or other effective arrangement in place. It also explored the extent to which case closure will affect their child maintenance decisions. The findings from Stage 1 led to the development of propositions which were tested in Stage 2. The key objectives for Stage 1 were as follows:

- Examine in depth the barriers that inhibit long-term separated parents from working together and putting a family-based or other effective arrangement in place.
- Examine in depth the extent to which case closure will affect the child maintenance decisions of long-term separated parents.
- Identify any differences between groups of long-term separated parents in terms of the above issues and in relation to those most likely to seek their own or other (i.e. statutory) child maintenance arrangements.
- Identify differing support/communication needs based on the differences identified above.

Stage 2 tested propositions designed to overcome barriers and encourage effective child maintenance arrangements and provide recommendations for improvement. The key objectives for Stage 2 were as follows:

- To test proposed interventions to understand if they would help/have helped parents put an effective child maintenance arrangement in place.
- To understand whether the proposed interventions would help/encourage parents to put a FBA in place.

## **1.3 Research approach**

### **1.3.1 Method**

A qualitative approach was used for this research. This was deemed to be most appropriate for a variety of reasons. First, the sensitivity and complexity of the subject matter meant that face-to-face engagement between the researchers and the participants would yield the most productive research environment. Second, it was important to understand the individual context that was influencing participants' feelings, attitudes and behaviours in relation to child maintenance. This meant that a research setting which enabled participants to provide a personalised account of a number of other relevant contextual issues would be most appropriate for this research. Third, qualitative research enabled interaction between participants, enabling them to compare experiences as they discussed the topics. This provided a rich discursive environment which was particularly useful for testing the propositions. Stage 1 of the research comprised 11 qualitative mini-groups and 22 depth interviews. Stage 2 of the research comprised six qualitative mini-groups, two paired depths

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and two depth interviews. These depth and group interviews were reconvened with parents from Stage 1. Mini-groups contained up to six parents. Each group lasted for 90 minutes and each depth lasted for 60 minutes.

A briefing exercise was used in Stages 1 and 2 where participants were shown and read out a series of show cards. For Stage 1 these show cards described the child maintenance reforms, including case closure, For Stage 2 the show cards explained the propositions designed to overcome barriers and encourage child maintenance arrangements. This ensured that all participants had a similar understanding prior to the discussions.

During Stage 2, participants were set an exercise following discussion of each proposition. The exercise asked participants to rate each proposition on a scale of 1 (not very) to 10 (very) regarding how helpful they would find each proposition. This allowed for individual feedback and reflection on each proposition discussed.

### **1.3.2 Recruitment**

The research participants were recruited via contact lists provided by DWP. All of the parents on the contact list had provided consent for their details to be used in a research capacity and were all CSA and CM Options customers. A screening questionnaire was developed, with pre-qualification criteria to ensure that the research parents met required sampling criteria, and that anyone with specialist knowledge of the subject could be excluded. For example, potential participants were not included if they worked for Citizens Advice Bureau or Jobcentre Plus, as they were likely to have more substantial knowledge of the topic.

Research was conducted across four locations: London, Newcastle, Birmingham and Bristol. The groups and depths took place in urban centres, with participants travelling to them from surrounding areas, in order to ensure a mix of those living in urban, suburban and more rural areas. Due to the nature of the study, groups were over-recruited to ensure maximum participation in the research.

### **1.3.3 Sample**

Sampling of long-term separated customers to take part in the research was carried out for both CSA and CM Options clients using stratified random sampling to select a range of client types, for example parent with care (PWC) or non-resident parent (NRP), gender, length of separation, compliant and non-compliant, Collection Service or Maintenance Direct, FBA or lapsed FBA, and region.

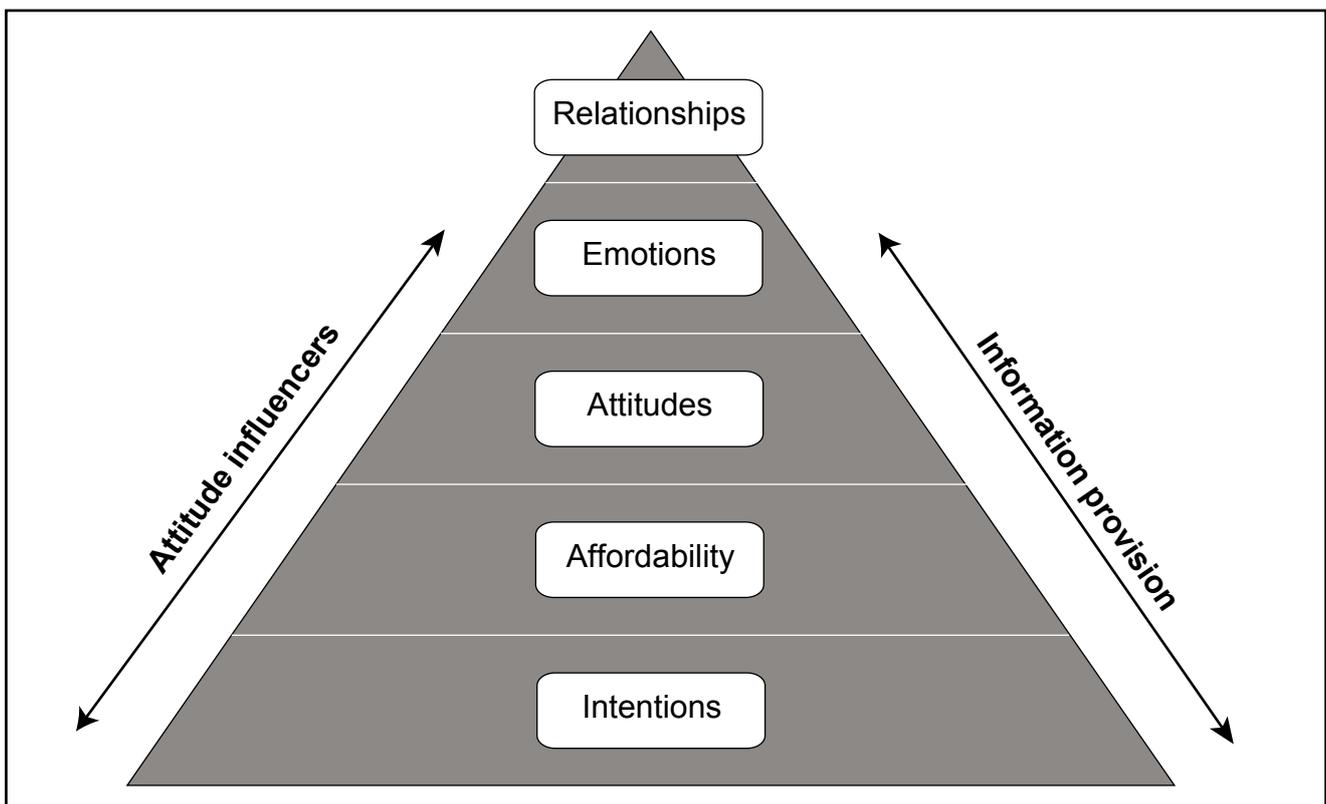
The sample for Stages 1 and 2 were all CSA clients or CM Options customers, including some who had a lapsed FBA. The mini-groups and paired depths were split by PWC and NRP. A range of payment methods (including lapsed FBA, Maintenance Direct and Collection Service), level of compliance and separation period was represented across the research. The sample included those from a spread of age groups.

A breakdown of the sample composition and challenges encountered in obtaining the sample can be viewed in Section A.1.

## 2 Separated Parent context

This chapter describes the context to the research in the form of relevant factors influencing attitudes, behaviours, and mind-sets surrounding child maintenance. Similar findings to those described in this chapter have also been identified in previous research conducted on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)<sup>1</sup>. These relevant factors are diverse and varied, and include thoughts, beliefs, emotions and the effects of past experiences, as well as the nature of the relationship between co-parents. PricewaterhouseCoopers research sought to understand the various drivers influencing separated parents' behaviour in relation to child maintenance. Their research identified a prioritisation of drivers of child maintenance behaviours<sup>2</sup> (Figure 2.1). The factors identified in the current research reflect those described by PricewaterhouseCoopers and can be categorised in a similar way:

**Figure 2.1 PricewaterhouseCoopers model of prioritisation of drivers of child maintenance behaviour**



As with the PricewaterhouseCoopers' model, the drivers varied in importance in terms of the extent to which they influence behaviour. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, the most influential factor was the nature of the co-parent relationship, and a good co-parent relationship had the most positive influence on parents' propensity to set up and sustain a successful arrangement. Other factors listed in the hierarchy also had an impact on this propensity, and

<sup>1</sup> DWP Relationship separation and child support study, 2008. <http://lx.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/rrep503.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120716161734/http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/pdf/research/Main-Report-Vol-I.pdf>

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varied in importance according to their position in the hierarchy, with emotions being the next most important driver after relationships, followed by attitudes, affordability and intentions. The hierarchy described in Figure 2.1 was also reflected in this research, with relationships having the greatest influence, followed by emotions, attitudes and so on.

The following sections describe the relevant factors within each of these key drivers, and the effect that they have for parents with care (PWCs) and for non-resident parents (NRPs). For PWCs, there were differences between Child Support Agency (CSA) customers and Child Maintenance (CM) Options customers, and these are described separately.

### **2.1 Parents with Care: Child Support Agency Customers**

Amongst PWCs who are CSA customers, there was a wide variation in terms of their current maintenance arrangement. There were those currently receiving maintenance, those who received maintenance only sporadically, and those who did not receive any maintenance. This is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

When discussing maintenance, the focus for PWCs with a CSA arrangement was upon their ability to receive maintenance regularly and reliably, enabling them to maintain stability, control and independence in their lives. However, even those with relatively stable and consistent arrangements had experienced delays in payment in the past, or periods where they did not receive any payments. The financial hardship, stress and worry resulting from this meant that PWCs tended to be strongly motivated to avoid disruption and change. To a varying extent, maintenance arrangements were seen as fragile, and especially for those with the most difficult co-parent relationships there was a risk that the NRP could stop payments at any time. This was the case even for those who had been separated for a long time, as fluctuations in relationships could occur long after separation.

#### **Relationships**

There was a wide variation in the quality of co-parent relationships. There were those who described their co-parent relationship as good, and maintenance arrangements between these parents tended to be more stable. This was often linked to wider collaboration between co-parents in a number of aspects of the parenting role, including childcare, and provision of financial support for one-off costs. At the opposite end of this spectrum, there were PWCs who had no or very little contact with the NRP, and who did not share any aspect of parenting with them. Such co-parent relationships were often characterised by a history of conflict and emotional pain, and a history of domestic violence in some cases. In between these two extremes were co-parent relationships of varying quality.

There was little sense that the quality of the co-parent relationship was related to the length of separation. However, the advent of a new partner or children for either co-parent tended to be a trigger for conflict and disagreement that could result in disruption to a maintenance arrangement.

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*'We had an informal arrangement ... he's got two more children now and when he met his current partner, she was a bit difficult about him giving us maintenance ... but we get on okay, we just ... have to keep it away from her. There was a threat that my maintenance was going to stop ... she had threatened to stop my maintenance .... I went to the CSA so it's something binding in place as well. He knew I was going to do it and he told me to so it was all fine ... he does pay for ... her uniform, he will give me extra but we have to keep it quiet from the partner, which is difficult and silly but that's the way it works.'*

(Newcastle, PWC, CSA lapsed FBA)

The quality of co-parent relationships fluctuated a great deal over time, and even those with the most stable and collaborative relationships had often had periods of conflict in the past, with the result that the PWC had applied to the CSA for maintenance.

### Emotions

PWCs often felt sustained anger and resentment towards their co-parent, even where current arrangements were relatively stable. This stemmed from the experience of conflict with their co-parent that had taken place over the period since the separation, during their break-up or subsequently. The extent to which PWCs felt angry and resentful was linked to their past experience of conflict with their co-parent, and also to their experience of receiving maintenance. Resentment was greatest for those not currently receiving maintenance, and this was directed at the statutory system as well as to the co-parent.

PWCs had sometimes experienced a great deal of conflict with their co-parent over the period since their separation, and often felt a strong desire to avoid emotional pain from continuing this conflict. This meant that there was a great deal of fear surrounding child maintenance – fear of emotional pain from conflict with the NRP, and fear of disrupting a potentially fragile co-parent relationship.

### Attitudes

Attitudes towards NRPs were important in driving PWC mind-sets and behaviours. PWCs tended to believe that NRPs underestimate the costs involved in raising a child, and that this misconception resulted in resistance from the NRP to paying an appropriate level of maintenance. There was also a belief amongst PWCs that NRPs, particularly those who are self-employed, tend to conceal their earnings to avoid paying the appropriate level of maintenance.

*'Basically they [employer] said this is his wage coming through. I know that it's not, it's totally not. But what can you do? His employers put him on a flat basic wage. It stinks but I can't be bothered to go back to CSA. He knows I am dependent on his maintenance. So if I go to the CSA he stops it and I have to wait 2 or 3 months without his maintenance money so he's got me over a barrel.'*

(PWC, Maintenance Direct, Newcastle)

PWCs often felt let down by the statutory system, as they had experienced delays and errors with payments, or because they believed that the system had not been effective in ensuring that they received the right level of maintenance. Despite this, there was a belief amongst many that the statutory system was the only route that would be effective in enabling them to secure maintenance from the NRP.

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### **Intentions**

In general, CSA PWCs were focused on their intentions to ensure that they continue to receive maintenance. As they tended to believe that the CSA is the main route to a secure arrangement, their intention was to continue with this. However, negative experiences of the CSA also raised fears about the transition to the new system, and consequently a risk that some customers may exit the system.

### **Information provision**

Long-term separated PWCs who are CSA customers tended to be fairly well-informed about their entitlements via the statutory route. Some had experienced a variety of types of arrangements including family-based arrangements (FBAs) and informal arrangements. Through this experience they had become informed and aware of the CSA routes to gaining information about maintenance. However, they tended to be unaware of CM Options.

## **2.2 Parents with Care: Child Maintenance Options customers**

It is worth noting that the parents described here as CM Options customers had often had little contact with CM Options. The contact that they had had come either in the form of a phone call from CM Options triggered by a benefits claim, or a one-off enquiry to CM Options. They therefore had little experience of the CM Options service and tended to be unaware of it. PWCs who had contacted CM Options had a very different mind-set from CSA customers, in that they were characterised by an unwillingness to ask for more maintenance from their co-parent. Like the CSA customers they were motivated to try to retain stability and control in their lives, but they approached this by avoiding a discussion about maintenance with their co-parent, to avoid any potential for conflict in their co-parent relationship.

Circumstances and maintenance arrangements varied widely, with some currently having no co-parent contact and receiving no maintenance, and others receiving regular maintenance via a FBA and collaborating with their co-parent in various aspects of parenting. CM Options customers tended to be highly focused on the welfare of their child, and to link this to a positive parenting role for the NRP. To this extent, they were afraid that a conversation about maintenance would result in conflict with the co-parent, and a potential disruption not only to an existing maintenance arrangement, but also to a disruption of their child(ren)'s relationship with their father, something that they were keen to avoid.

### **Relationships**

As with CSA PWCs, CM Options customers varied widely in the quality of their co-parent relationships.

Some had little or no contact, and this group tended also not to receive any maintenance. Some amongst this group had not received any maintenance since their separation, and were not well-informed about their entitlements. In addition, they were not well motivated to gather more information, as they preferred not to discuss maintenance with their co-parent.

Others had a high level of collaboration with their co-parent, and this group were more likely to be receiving maintenance, and also to be collaborating a great deal with their co-parent. In direct contrast to CSA PWCs, a small number of CM Options customers were sharing

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

childcare between parents to a considerable extent. For example, one CM Options PWC was able to go to work because her children's father looked after their children for several hours each day. In this context, she was unwilling to request maintenance from her co-parent in addition to the support she already received.

In common with CSA PWCs, fluctuation occurred in the quality of the co-parent relationship, and in many cases relations had deteriorated since the arrival of a new partner.

### **Emotions**

As with CSA PWCs, the CM Options PWCs had a strong desire to avoid the emotional pain of conflict with their co-parent. There was fear of revisiting past conflicts, and a desire to avoid taking any action which might 'rock the boat' or disrupt a fragile peace. There was also a strong fear of any action which might antagonise the co-parent and disrupt maintenance, therefore CM Options customers were more likely to be passive and accepting in their approach to dealings with their co-parent.

### **Attitudes**

CM Options customers were motivated by avoidance of conflict, rather than to maximise their chances of receiving maintenance regularly. As they saw it, this enabled them to maintain relative control and stability in their lives. This meant that, in contrast to CSA PWCs, CM Options PWCs were less likely to question the amount of maintenance that they were receiving, and felt that it was better to receive some maintenance than to receive none at all.

In addition, CM Options PWCs were highly focused on the wellbeing of their child, in particular on the role of co-parent collaboration in this. They therefore felt disinclined to antagonise their co-parent in any way, or to risk doing so. They felt that an application for maintenance via the CSA was likely to antagonise their co-parent, and also that it represented a failure of their ability to collaborate.

### **Intentions**

CM Options customers tended to be very disinclined to engage with the system, particularly if they saw a risk of antagonising their co-parent and disrupting the status quo.

A key motivating factor for CM Options PWCs was in taking any action that would enhance their child's wellbeing. There was, therefore, a strong desire to improve parental collaboration and increase parental involvement for their co-parent.

### **Information provision**

It is worth noting that although they are termed CM Options customers in this research, the PWCs in this sample had little or no awareness of CM Options as an information resource. The CM Options PWCs included in the research were generally poorly informed about their rights and entitlements in relation to child maintenance, and unaware of the routes to gaining such information. Any knowledge that they had managed to amass had therefore been gathered in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner. There was some fear of engaging with the statutory system and this appeared to have acted as a barrier to engaging with information sources that could be perceived to have a link to the CSA.

## **2.3 Non-resident parents: Child Support Agency Customers**

NRPs tended to focus on the importance of parental access and parental involvement in relation to maintenance. To some extent, maintenance was seen as a quid pro quo to being allowed to have parental access to and involvement with their child. There was a high level of variation amongst NRPs as to the nature of their maintenance arrangement, and as with the PWCs this tended to have fluctuated considerably over the time since separation. Some NRPs said that they paid the precise amount of maintenance required as a part of their CSA arrangement, and some made ad hoc contributions over and above this. Others made regular payments over and above what was required by the arrangement. Those who stated that they made payments over and above CSA requirements tended to have the highest level of parental collaboration, and were involved in many aspects of parenting.

### **Relationships**

There was a highly varied picture of relationship quality, with some NRPs appearing to have a good level of mutual collaboration with the PWC, including regular contact and discussion about issues relating to their child. Others had little or no contact with their co-parent, or with their children. For some, there was resentment and conflict in the co-parent relationship, but a relative stability was maintained for the welfare of the children. For others, the co-parent relationship had broken down to the extent that the NRP had been denied parental access to their child or children. The key factor for NRPs was the extent to which the PWC enabled them to have a relationship with their child or children. Where this was not permitted or enabled by the PWC, this was a key cause of conflict and resentment.

As with the PWCs, co-parent relationships fluctuated considerably over time, and new relationships were a leading cause of disruption or breakdown in co-parent relations.

### **Emotions**

For NRPs, there was often considerable anger and resentment, towards PWCs and towards the system. Anger towards PWCs stemmed from past acrimony, but was particularly heightened where parental access was denied. Even where such conflict had been resolved, there was often a fear of reigniting hostilities and risking losing parental access in the future. NRPs were resentful of the system for 'hounding' them into making payments, and often felt unfairly victimised by a system that was seen to favour mothers.

*'The attitude was they [CSA] don't give a damn about the fathers. Whatever the mother says they agree. We are left in such a situation that you feel embarrassed and your children look at you think and you're a loser. There's no support ... it felt like a money making business.'*

(NRP, CSA, Newcastle)

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

### **Attitudes**

NRPs varied in their attitude towards maintenance arrangements via the statutory system. Some preferred to avoid the system where possible and make an informal arrangement where they would have control over payments. Others feared uncertainty and preferred the 'safety net' of the statutory system which provided them with reassurance that they had paid appropriately and would not be faced with arrears.

A number of NRPs felt suspicious of PWCs claims about the cost of raising a child, and felt that PWCs made unreasonable demands for a high level of maintenance.

### **Intentions**

In general, NRPs were motivated to avoid a CSA arrangement and preferred an informal arrangement that would help them to maintain control over payments, enabling flexibility where possible. There was also a desire, however, for clarity about the appropriate level of contribution.

### **Information provision**

NRPs appeared less inclined to engage proactively with information sources, and tended instead to wait until there was a problem or a crisis. The main known information source was the CSA, and none had been previously aware of CM Options.

# 3 Current and past child maintenance arrangements

This chapter describes the types of maintenance arrangements that parents had in place at the time of the interview, as well as their past experiences with private and statutory arrangements.

## 3.1 Characteristics of current and past arrangements

A complex picture emerged during the research, with parents holding a wide range of types of arrangements including Child Support Agency (CSA) arrangements, informal family-based arrangements (FBAs), and no arrangement. These arrangements did not necessarily reflect the sampling criteria to which the parents had originally been recruited, as the complexity could not easily have been captured in a recruitment interview. Broadly speaking, parents held one of the following types of arrangements:

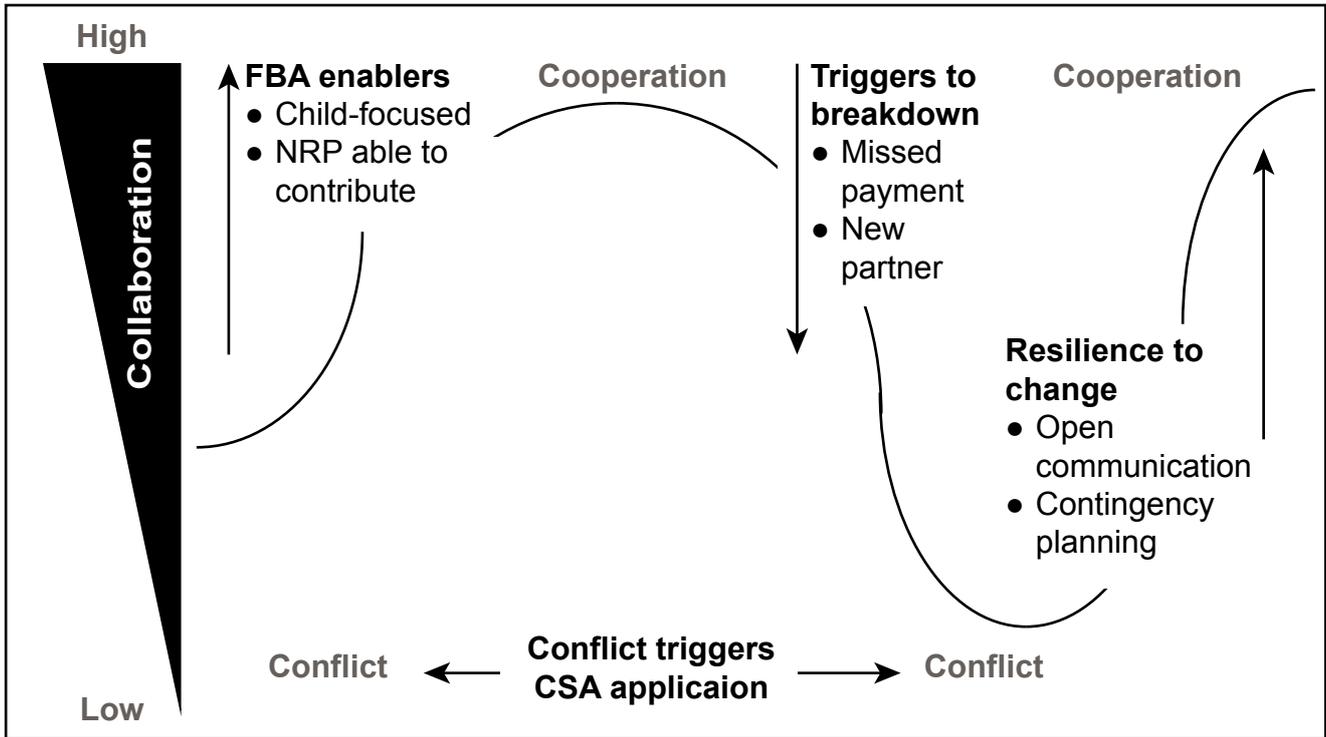
- CSA arrangement, either Collection Service or Maintenance Direct;
- informal FBA;
- no arrangement.

A number of ambiguities were discovered surrounding these types of arrangements, however, making it difficult to categorise maintenance arrangements definitively. These were as follows:

### Fluctuation

It became clear that arrangements, particularly informal or FBAs, were subject to disruption and change. Long-term separated parents had often experienced several phases of arrangements, moving between informal and statutory arrangements over the years since their separation. Figure 3.1 describes this fluctuation including triggers to changes in the arrangement. A typical child maintenance 'journey' from separation to the present day could include several types of arrangements, sometimes overlapping. For example, immediately after separation, some co-parents had had an initial informal arrangement, during a phase of reasonable co-parent relations. Over time, this had often been disrupted as a result of conflict between co-parents, triggering a CSA application. For some parents, conflict could ultimately be resolved and cooperation restored.

Figure 3.1 Fluctuation in maintenance arrangements



Some parents had been through this cycle of cooperation and conflict more than once since their separation. For some this had resulted in a downward spiral of acrimony and conflict, where others had been more able to resolve their problems and re-establish good relations. This fluctuation is described in Figure 3.1, along with some of the enablers and barriers of a positive FBA. These barriers and enablers are discussed in more detail in Section 3.4.

## Compliance

Although a number of parents were ostensibly non-compliant in their CSA arrangement, it is worth noting that this did not necessarily mean that maintenance was not being paid in some form. Some non-resident parents (NRPs) had agreed to make informal payments separate to their CSA arrangement, and had reverted to making use of this informal arrangement instead of their CSA arrangement.

A further ambiguity came in the form of parents with an informal arrangement or FBA involving payments which were made with reasonable frequency and consistency although not necessarily with regularity. It was unclear whether such arrangements would be categorised as compliant, and whether they were satisfactory to both parties. From the parent with care (PWC) perspective, it was important to receive payments on time, and fluctuations in the timing of payments caused stress and hardship.

## Overlapping arrangements

A number of parents had made informal arrangements over and above their CSA arrangement, either in the form of ad hoc contributions for holidays or school uniforms, or in the form of regular top-ups.

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

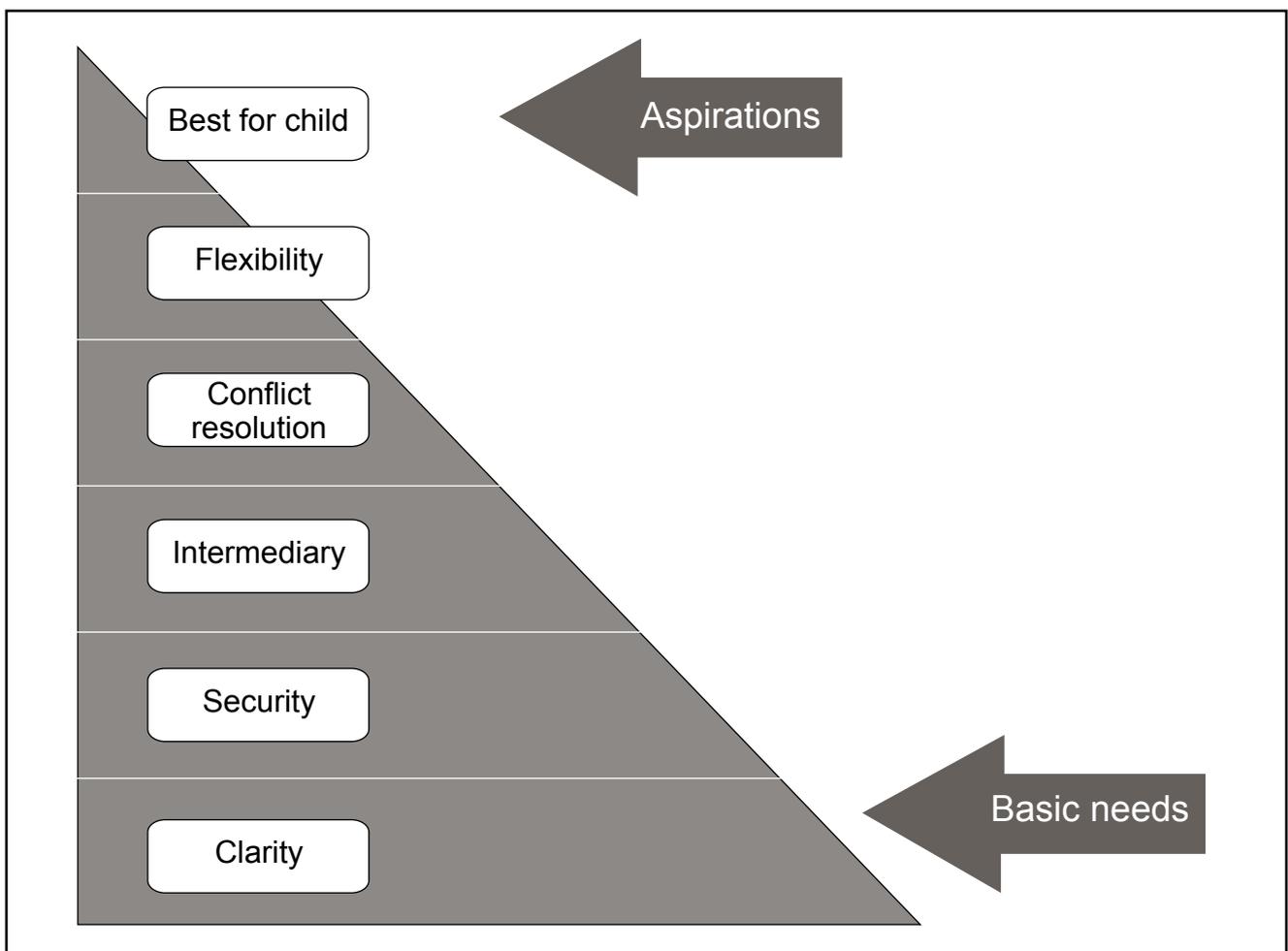
### No arrangement

There was also some ambiguity surrounding those with no arrangement, as this definition included a variety of potential scenarios. For some, this took the form of a non-compliant CSA arrangement where there was little or no contact between co-parents. For others, occasional ad hoc contributions were made, but these were so infrequent or unpredictable that they could not be termed as an arrangement per se.

## 3.2 Desired attributes from a maintenance arrangement

The research identified a number of key attributes from a maintenance arrangement, with varying importance for individuals. It was clear that maintenance needs exist in a hierarchy, where basic requirements must be met before parents can consider more aspirational aspects of an arrangement. Although the 'best for child' attribute appears at the top of the hierarchy in Figure 3.2, this was seen as achievable only for a few parents. Most had set their sights lower, focusing on the attributes of clarity and security.

Figure 3.2 Prioritisation of needs from a maintenance arrangement



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

The factors contributing to each of the levels of the hierarchy are summarised as follows:

### Clarity

The core need for all long-term separated parents is for a maintenance arrangement where both parties are clear about the details of their agreement. For PWCs, clarity around the amount of maintenance and the timing of delivery are key. For NRPs, there is a need for clarity around what is expected, and of the limits and parameters of this.

### Security

All long-term separated parents required a secure and stable maintenance arrangement in which they can have confidence. For PWCs, a secure arrangement means the safe knowledge that they will receive maintenance at the expected level on time. For NRPs, security means knowing that they are paying the correct amount, and that this amount is limited and finite.

### Intermediary

A core need for all long-term separated parents is to avoid unresolved conflict with their co-parent. For some, this means avoiding contact with the co-parent where possible, and an arrangement that minimises the need for discussion or involvement with their co-parent is preferred. An intermediary could be a person or entity that would help parents to avoid direct contact and thereby avoid the risk of conflict. This could include an entity such as the statutory system.

### Conflict resolution

Some long-term separated parents were pessimistic about their ability to resolve conflict with their co-parent, and a maintenance arrangement involving an element of external support for conflict resolution was desirable. This was seen as crucial to maintaining an arrangement over time.

### Flexibility

Flexibility is desirable to help maintain an agreement that is realistic and achievable over time, particularly for NRPs with a fluctuating income. However, PWCs also valued flexibility in the form of additional payments for ad hoc costs such as school uniforms and holidays.

### Best for child

All long-term separated parents spoke of their desire to achieve an arrangement that best meets the needs of their child or children. An ideal arrangement was thought to be one that was satisfactory for both parents and involved collaboration between parents in all aspects of parenting, including parental access. Parents described this arrangement as an informal one, agreed via discussion between them.

## 3.3 Role of the statutory system

Parents described the role of the statutory system in their arrangements to date, drawing from current and past experiences of both informal and statutory arrangements. The key role of the statutory system was in meeting the lower level needs outlined in Figure 3.2 of clarity,

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

security and an intermediary function for parents who did not wish to have contact. For the higher level, more aspirational maintenance needs such as flexibility and conflict resolution, parents felt that the statutory system did not currently meet their needs.

### **3.4 Family-based arrangements**

This section describes parents' responses to the concept of a FBA. This includes spontaneous discussion of past experience of a FBA, and also responses to stimulus materials describing a FBA (see Section B.1).

*'If you've got a bloke who is responsible and has a conscience then a FBA might work.'*

(PWC, Maintenance Direct, Newcastle)

*'It will make women communicate better and be nicer ... it's better for the father'*

(NRP, CSA, Newcastle)

*'It looks like there's no set amount ... the arrangement is arbitrary.'*

(PWC, Maintenance Direct, Newcastle)

#### **3.4.1 Perceptions**

Parents tended to see an informal FBA as an ideal solution to best meet the needs of their children, although this was not always seen as a realistic or achievable option. In terms of the hierarchy of maintenance needs, FBAs were thought to have the potential to fulfil higher-level, aspirational needs such as flexibility and collaboration, but there was uncertainty around core needs such as clarity and security.

The key benefit of a FBA was its perceived emphasis on the welfare of the child. FBAs were thought to be characterised by parental collaboration in various realms in addition to maintenance payments. NRPs particularly favoured FBAs due to their potential to provide flexibility, and this aspect was particularly valued by NRPs with fluctuating incomes or other circumstances where the rigidity of a statutory arrangement presented challenges.

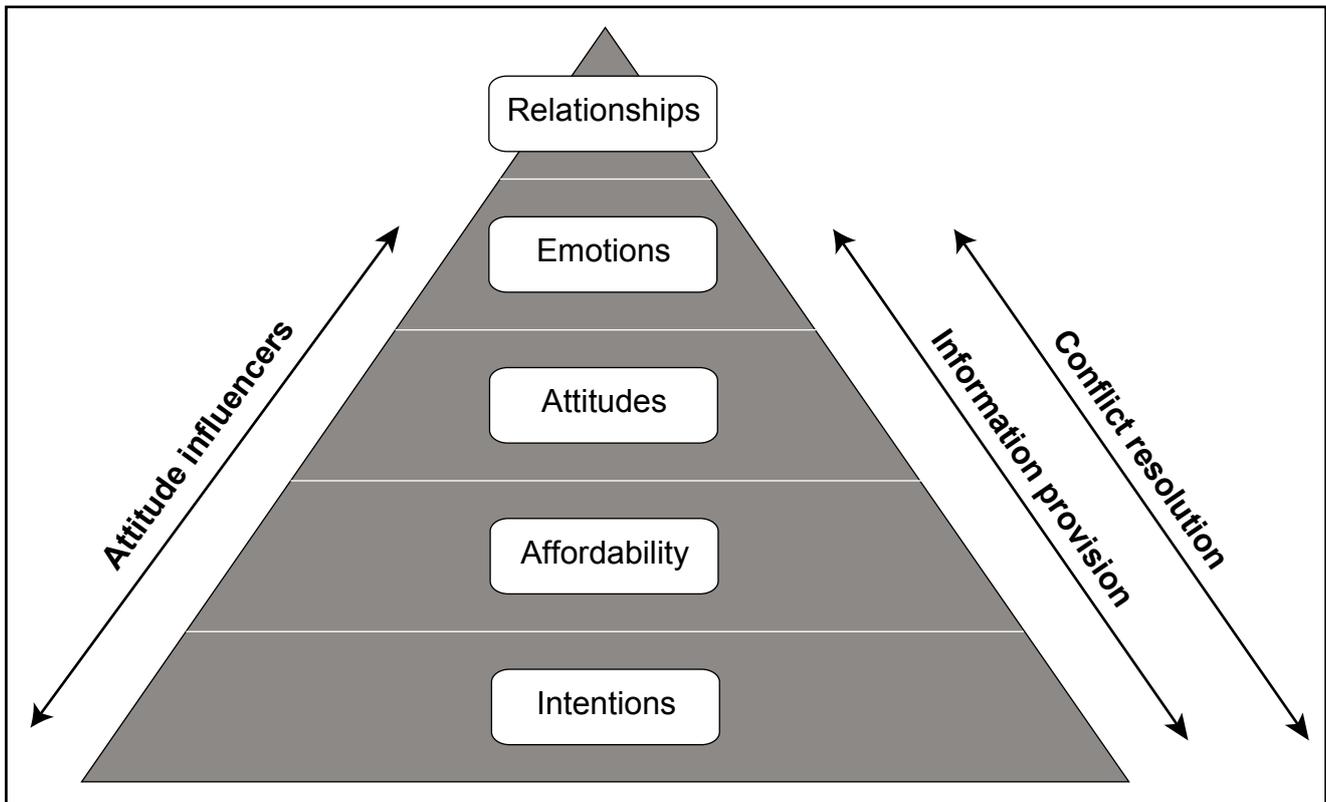
*'It's all about communication really and speaking it out cos arguing ain't gonna solve anything ... so a good relationship for the kids is paramount.'*

(NRP, CSA lapsed FBA, Bristol)

#### **3.4.2 Capacity to build and sustain a family-based arrangement**

There was a wide variation in terms of parents' perceived capacity to set up and sustain a FBA. This can be described in terms of the PricewaterhouseCoopers model of maintenance drivers (Figure 3.3). It was clear that those with the most positive conditions present within each of the domains identified in the model had the greatest opportunity to successfully develop and maintain their FBA. In addition, this research identified an additional domain of conflict resolution which was critical to sustaining an arrangement:

Figure 3.3 Updated model of PricewaterhouseCoopers model of prioritisation of drivers of child maintenance behaviour



Those parents who were able to draw upon current and past experience of a FBA provided insights into the conditions required to set up and sustain a successful arrangement. Other parents reflected on their expectations as to the conditions needed to enable them to maintain a FBA.

### Relationships

The quality of the co-parent relationship was thought to be critical to the success of a FBA. This was particularly the case because wider parental collaboration was thought to be the primary goal of a FBA, of which maintenance payments may be just one feature.

*'For me a FBA would be better because we get on better now than before. He is making regular payments and also it has helped build a relationship with his child. I am happy with it. I prefer mutual agreement because it is fine and there are no arguments. But it is all about trust. The problem is when he stops making a payment.'*

(Birmingham, PWC, Maintenance Direct)

### Emotions

As a result of the strong emphasis on parental collaboration, it would be necessary for the emotional landscape to be relatively calm and stable. This would mean that acrimony, anger and resentment would need to reduce or recede in order to sustain the FBA.

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

### **Attitudes**

A child-focused outlook was thought to be key to enabling a successful FBA. This would mean a reduced focus on problems in the co-parent relationship.

### **Affordability**

A stable and consistent income for NRPs was a key condition for success, as fluctuations and missed payments caused a trigger for conflict and breakdown in the arrangement. There was a lack of awareness as to how FBAs may provide a more flexible approach to dealing with fluctuating incomes than is available via the statutory scheme.

### **Intentions**

It was important that parents were focused primarily on the intention to find a long-term, sustainable arrangement, and were willing to consider a change to the status quo.

### **Information provision**

A key concern relating to all arrangements was mutual suspicion surrounding PWC's account of childrearing costs and the NRP account of their income. Where there was more clarity on these elements, trust could be sustained enabling the FBA to be maintained.

*'The thing is that they want to know what we are spending their money on. They think we are spending the money on other things.'*

(Birmingham, PWC, Maintenance Direct)

### **Attitude influencers**

Key parties influencing the FBA were the wider community such as mutual acquaintances and neighbours, the extended family, and new partners or family. Where these parties were supportive, there was a greater chance of the FBA being sustained.

#### **Conflict resolution**

Successful conflict resolution was a key condition for a successful arrangement, and this is discussed in more detail in Section 3.4.3.

### **3.4.3 Conflict resolution and prevention**

In the experience of long-term separated parents, FBAs tended to have broken down as a result of conflict triggered by one or other party having a new partner, or by missed maintenance payments. It was clear that parents' ability to resolve conflict is critical in successfully sustaining a FBA.

Those who had successfully resolved their conflicts tended to have been proactive in taking action early, either to set in place conditions that would help to avert problems in the future – for example, planning around fluctuations in the NRP's income – or had taken action immediately when there was a potential for a conflict to occur. It was clear that problems were more difficult to resolve once acrimony had developed between the two parties. Resolving conflict was more difficult still when difficulties had become entrenched, and several payments had been missed.

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

Conditions and strategies for preventing and resolving conflicts can be described in terms of the various domains of the model of maintenance drivers (Figure 3.3). As before, these issues exist in a hierarchy of importance, with relationships being the primary factor enabling parents to maintain a FBA during periods of conflict.

### **Relationships**

Clear communication was an important driver of success in resolving conflict, enabling parents to understand each others' circumstances, and to make plans together to sustain their arrangement. In addition, one or both parties had been proactive in contacting the other to make arrangements. For example, one NRP with an informal FBA had spoken to his co-parent when he became aware that he would miss a payment. She had offered a suggestion for how he could compensate for this in the form of a later payment.

It was important that the style of communication between co-parents should be acceptable to both of them, and should be calm and reasonable. Parents felt deterred from communicating with their co-parent if there was an expectation that they could experience aggressive or confrontational behaviour from their co-parent.

A further success factor was a good relationship between the NRP and his child(ren). Successful FBAs tended to be characterised by a higher level of parental involvement from NRPs. Parental disputes over NRP parental access were likely to give rise to a level of conflict that was difficult to resolve.

### **Emotions**

Co-parent relationships where conflict had been successfully resolved were characterised by the ability and willingness to set aside disagreements to focus on the welfare of their child(ren). Parents differed in the extent to which they felt emotionally and psychologically able to cope with conflict and acrimony with their co-parent. Also, there were differences in the degree of emotional difficulties resulting from historical acrimony between co-parents. For those who had experienced a great deal of emotional pain, anger and resentment, it was more difficult to resolve conflicts with their co-parent.

### **Attitudes**

For parents to have the will and ability to sustain their arrangement through conflict, it was important for them to believe that their arrangement was the most beneficial one for them and their child(ren). Where doubts emerged about the terms of the arrangement, it was more difficult to avoid conflict. It was also important for them to have the belief that their arrangement was secure, and could be realistically maintained by both parties.

### **Affordability**

For an arrangement to be secure and sustainable, it was important that it was realistically affordable based on NRP income. It appeared that an important element of this was the opportunity to build in flexibility around fluctuations in NRP income where necessary. This was particularly relevant for those who were self-employed.

### **Intentions**

For those who were able to maintain an arrangement despite conflict, there was a continuous focus on the welfare of the child(ren), and this took priority over other concerns.

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

### **Information provision**

Lack of mutual trust in relation to PWC spending and NRP income is a key cause of conflict between parents. Therefore, information surrounding these two issues can support co-parents in maintaining the belief that their arrangement is fair and appropriate. Parents who felt confident that the amounts of maintenance being paid were appropriate were less inclined to experience conflict. Parents who had a lapsed FBA had often experienced doubts about the amount of maintenance, resulting in a CSA application.

*'If he had just called me and told me that he won't be able to pay me the next month I would have been fine. It is when they don't call and just disappear that makes me mad. Once they break the trust it is difficult to get back to any system. There is no way I would have any arrangement with my son's dad after the way he has let us down with the payments. It will be hard for me to trust him again.'*

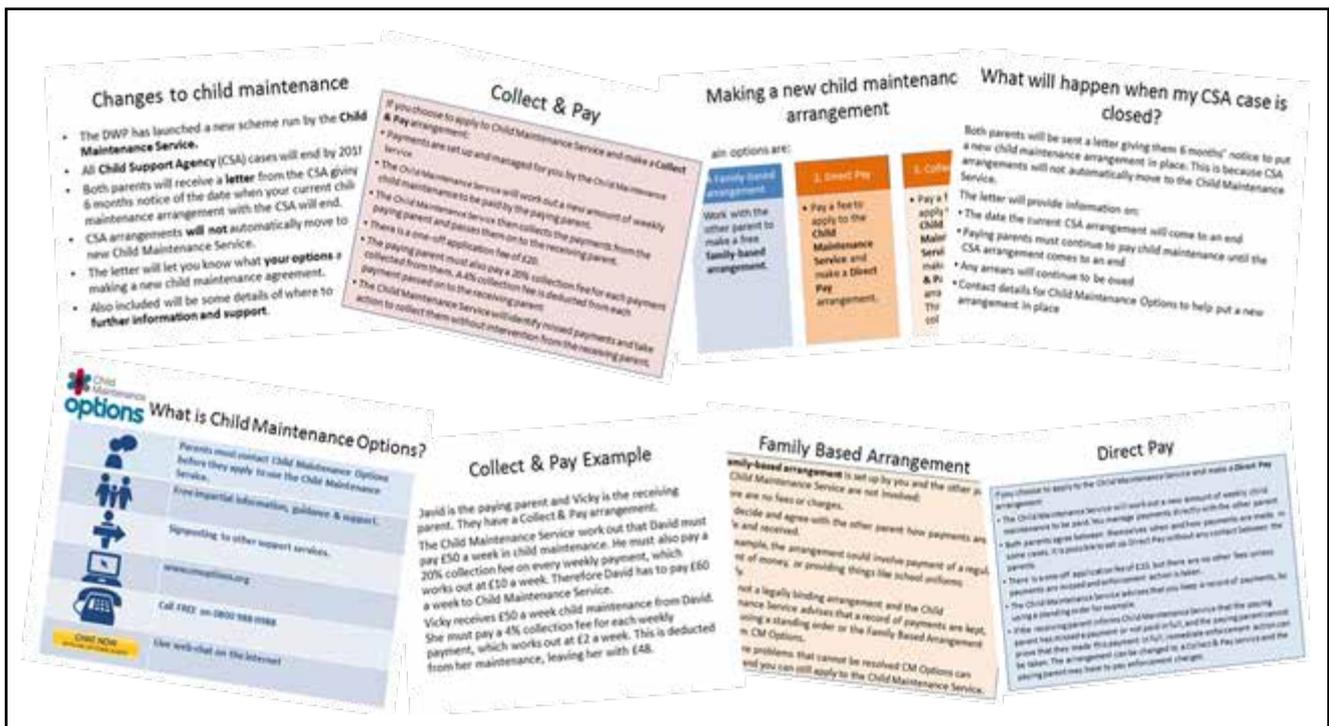
(Birmingham, PWC, CSA lapsed FBA)

### **Attitude influencers**

The presence of supportive friends and family was a key enabler of conflict resolution. In addition, parental access to clear, definitive and authoritative information on the fairness of their arrangement also helped. This could include clear evidence of payments made, information about NRP income levels, and evidence of the true costs of child rearing. These pieces of information have a powerfully reassuring effect for parents, and can help to prevent conflict.

# 4 Responses to changes in the statutory system

This chapter describes parents' responses to information about the child maintenance reforms. Parents were presented with a series of show cards describing the changes, including plans for case closure, and some potential options for future maintenance arrangements.



## 4.1 Initial responses

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

*'Are they going to have to review every single case they currently have? How many of us have got an issue with our ex that we can't agree, so they are going to be doing a lot of reviewing, and who's going to suffer, the children?'*

(NRP, lapsed FBA, Bristol)

Parents tended to foresee problems in setting up a new arrangement. The information about case closure tended to raise fears about the future, particularly around the potential for conflict with their co-parent, and the potential for missed payments. Parents talked about the stress and worry that they would be likely to experience whilst they made their new arrangement.

*'Things have been working well for us now for a few years and I wouldn't want anything*

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

*to change that. I don't want anything to mess up my arrangement. It has been so good for a while. But if CSA will get in touch with him then it will mess things up.'*

(Birmingham, PWC, Maintenance Direct)

The information about fees was received particularly negatively, with many blaming this on government cost-cutting, and highlighting the potential impact on their children's futures. Some commented that this amounted to unfairly penalising parents, particularly PWCs who are reliant on their maintenance arrangements.

*'This new system is a disgrace. They are supposed to help us and not take money from us.'*

(PWC, CSA, Birmingham)

*'What's the point of a fine? If they're not going to pay child maintenance they're not going to pay a fine are they?'*

(PWC, Maintenance Direct, Newcastle)

*'At the moment, it doesn't cost me anything to give her that amount of money, but now I'm going to have to pay a fee to fix the same amount of money going out?'*

(NRP, Maintenance Direct, Bristol)

*'This may be penalising me but the person who is going to suffer is going to be my son, and the fallout to my ex's present partner...it's the emotional impact...You're forced to lock horns again when things have been blown over for whatever period of time.'*

(NRP, Maintenance Direct, Bristol)

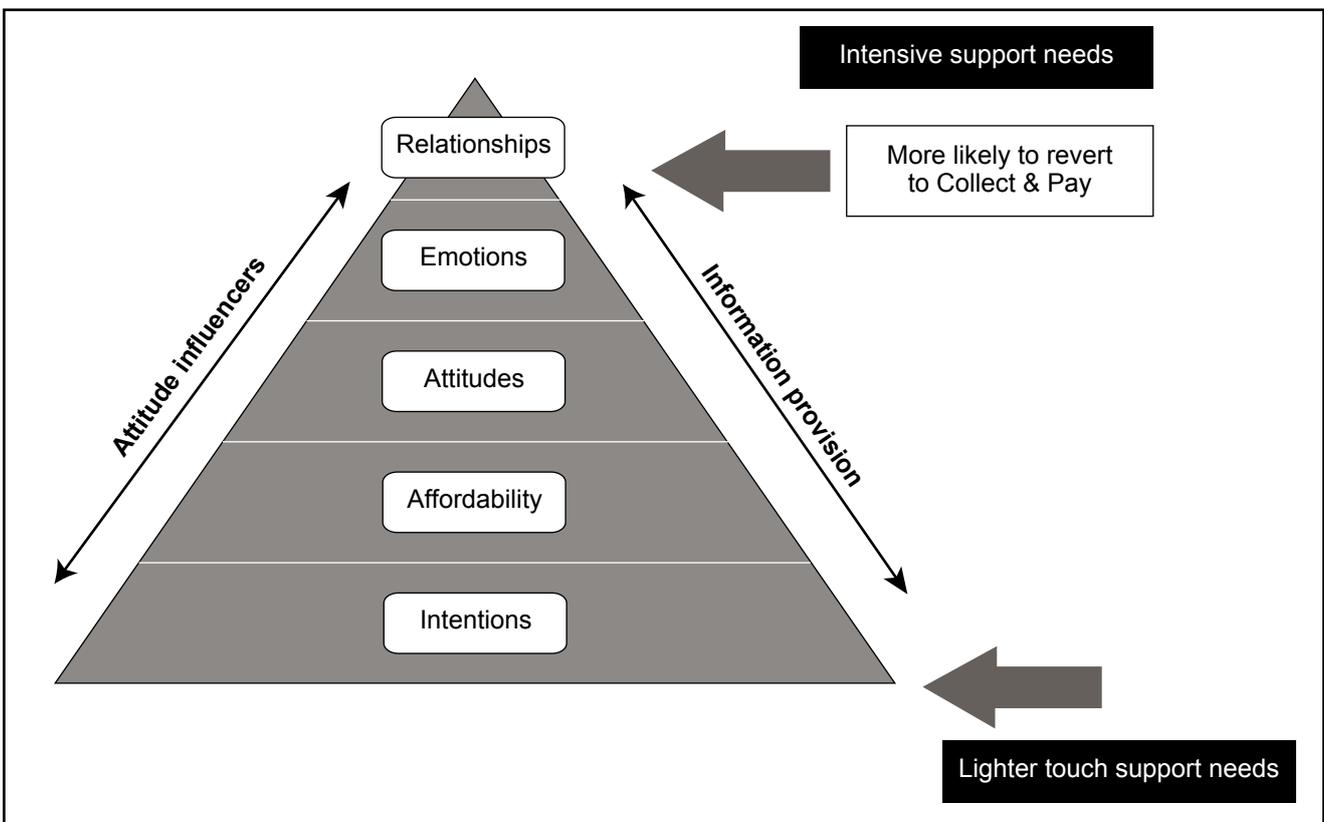
For the small number of parents who already had a mutually agreed informal arrangement, there was a potential for some positive disruption. This included those who were non-compliant in their statutory arrangement but had developed a family-based arrangement (FBA) in its place, and those receiving ad hoc additional contributions over and above their Child Support Agency (CSA) arrangement. Case closure could encourage such parents to end their statutory arrangement and revert fully to a FBA.

The concept of a FBA was new for some parents, and there was discussion and debate about what such an arrangement could involve. The two statutory options presented, Collect & Pay and Direct Pay, were regarded as synonymous with the existing statutory system, albeit with application and collection fees attached. There was little distinction drawn between these two options. For those who did not think that a FBA was likely to work for them, Collect & Pay was the preferred option, as this most closely mirrored the CSA statutory arrangement with which they were already familiar.

## 5 Support needs

The discussion on case closure focused on parents' plans and on their potential to set up a family-based arrangement (FBA) in the future. Parents who did not already have a FBA in place tended to have a variety of concerns about FBAs, and the intensity of these concerns varied between parents. This variation can be described in terms of the model of maintenance drivers shown in Figure 5.1. Those with the most difficult co-parent relationships were those with the most intensive support needs.

Figure 5.1 Maintenance drivers and support needs 1



Those with the most acute concerns would be likely to need a great deal of external support if they were to consider setting up a FBA.

*'What makes it [FBA] work is your relationship with your ex...there's often such a breakdown of trust that it's hard to get agreement on anything.'*

(NRP, lapsed FBA, Bristol)

### 5.1 Key questions and concerns about a family-based arrangement

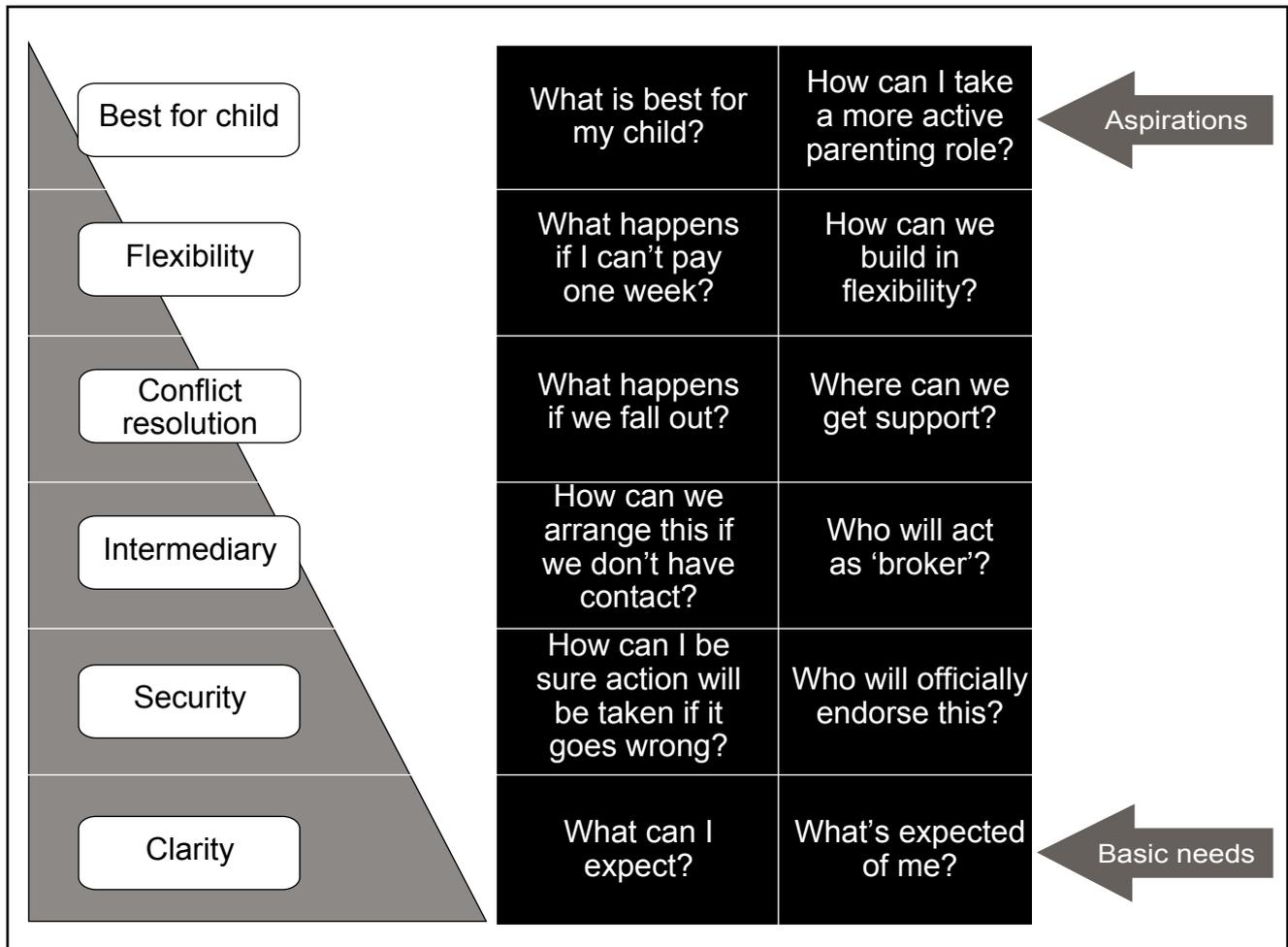
Parents discussed and debated their concerns surrounding FBAs. Some had not previously considered or experienced a FBA, where others currently held a FBA or had experience of a FBA from the past. Key concerns surrounded the basic practicalities of a FBA, and although

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

most could see the advantages of a mutually agreed arrangement between parents, these advantages were outweighed by the potential loss of security and clarity.

Concerns about a FBA followed the maintenance needs hierarchy, and are summarised in Figure 5.2. Where parents foresaw problems with lower level aspects of a FBA such as clarity and security, they were prevented from engaging with more aspirational, higher level aspirations such as flexibility, or what's best for their child.

**Figure 5.2 Maintenance drivers and support needs 2**



Uncertainties around FBAs tended to focus on the need for an external 'official' endorsement of the arrangement. For those with the greatest needs, they would prefer this external body to provide security and to act as an intermediary or 'broker' for the arrangement. For others, this external body would mainly be required to help resolve conflict. Those with the lowest level of support needs would only need advice or information from external bodies to help support their FBA.

## 5.2 Family-based arrangement support needs

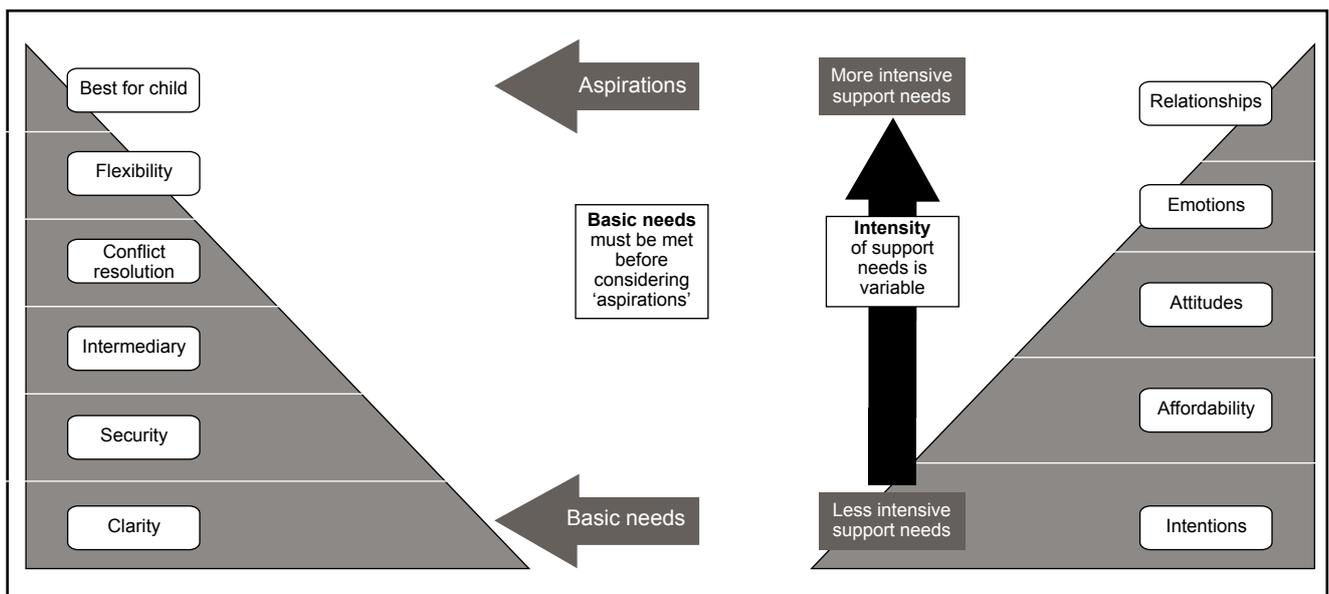
A number of support needs were identified during the research. These were based upon parents' own suggestions, and they were also identified by researchers following discussions of parents' experience of FBAs. Support needs were categorised into a hierarchy, with the most fundamental support needs relating to the basic requirements from a child maintenance

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

arrangement. The hierarchy of maintenance needs described in Section 3.2 (Figure 3.2), shows that these most basic needs are for security and clarity. More 'aspirational' needs are those which provide flexibility, or which take into account the best interests of your child.

As well as varying in their nature, support needs varied in intensity, depending on the conditions present for each parent. A prioritisation of maintenance drivers is described in Chapter 2 (Figure 2.1). This showed a range of factors such as relationship quality, emotions, and attitudes can impact on parents' propensity to set up a mutually beneficial child maintenance arrangement, and that certain factors are more important than others. In particular, relationship quality and emotions have the greatest influence. Those with less favourable conditions in terms of these important factors have more intense support needs when setting up a FBA, where those with more favourable conditions have less intense support needs. Figure 5.3 summarises the impact of each of these hierarchies, showing how maintenance needs vary, and the intensity of support required varies, according to parents' individual circumstances:

**Figure 5.3 Maintenance drivers and support needs 3**



The following sections describe suggested support within each of the domains of the maintenance needs hierarchy.

### 5.2.1 Clarity

A fundamental need for parents setting up an arrangement was to have a clear understanding of their rights and entitlements, and to feel reassured that their arrangement was in line with these entitlements. It was also crucial that parents should be aware of what was expected of them, in the case of non-resident parents (NRPs), and that they should clearly understand what to expect (parents with care (PWCs)).

Suggestions to address this need were as follows. The intensity of support needs varied between parents, and the suggestions are listed in order of intensity, with the most intense support options listed first:

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- caseworker to ‘broker’ and ‘police’ the maintenance agreement;
- external legal endorsement of the agreement;
- an ‘official’ printed agreement to sign;
- record of payments;
- guidelines on acceptable amounts.

Key to these suggestions were the provision of external, official or legal endorsement of their agreement. At the most intense level, this took the form of a caseworker who would oversee and police the arrangement, where at the less intense level this could simply involve informing parents about the appropriateness of the amount of maintenance.

Although it was understood that legal backing was not a feature of a FBA, this was thought to be necessary by parents who thought that there would be a high likelihood of missed payments.

### **5.2.2 Security**

A key concern surrounding FBAs was that payments would be missed and that there would not be any procedures in place to prevent this or to deal with it appropriately. For parents with low expectations of the success of a FBA, this aspect prevented them from considering a FBA as an option for the future.

Suggestions to address this need were as follows. The intensity of support needs varied between parents, and the suggestions are listed in order of intensity, with the most intense support options listed first:

- formalised legally-binding agreement;
- guidance on options for recourse to enforcement;
- credible formalised agreement paperwork;
- proof of payments and purchases.

At the most intense level, parents sought legal backing for their agreement. Although this was seen to be at odds with the concept of an informal agreement between parents, this was a precondition of considering a FBA for some parents. Others simply sought some kind of formalisation of their agreement, via official paperwork, or even paperwork that appeared to have official backing. This need for formality could be met via the use of logos or official language on agreement documentation.

*‘The FBA should come with a form that everyone signs and that is legally binding’*

(PWC, Maintenance Direct, Newcastle)

### **5.2.3 Intermediary**

Parents saw a need for an external party to provide validation or support for their agreement, particularly when making contact with their co-parent. Parents were often intimidated by the idea of communicating with their co-parent, particularly where there had been serious acrimony in the past.

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Suggestions to address this need were as follows. The intensity of support needs varied between parents, and the suggestions are listed in order of intensity, with the most intense support options listed first:

- on-call case-worker to moderate a maintenance agreement;
- mediation at key points in the lifecycle of the FBA;
- regular review of the FBA;
- ad-hoc external support and advice available as required;
- early external endorsement of the FBA.

Parents envisaged that they would need external support for their FBA in the form of an external body to act in an intermediary role between co-parents. This could be relevant at various times as they set up and sustained their agreement. For some, this support could be confined to early endorsement of their FBA, where others saw a need for support at various times, particularly during periods of conflict.

*'If I knew every single penny was being spent on my two daughters I wouldn't be bothered.'*

(NRP, CSA, Newcastle)

### 5.2.4 Conflict resolution

FBA's were seen as particularly vulnerable during periods of conflict between co-parents, and the need for support at these times was particularly mentioned by parents considering a FBA.

Suggestions to address this need were as follows. The intensity of support needs varied between parents, and the suggestions are listed in order of intensity, with the most intense support options listed first:

- caseworker to provide active review;
- meeting spaces to encourage communication;
- preventive mediation to avoid a dispute;
- guidance on managing conflict/disruption.

Parents with the most intensive support needs anticipated that an external party would be needed to help mediate in the case of a dispute. Ideally this would involve a caseworker known to the parents who would be able to support them in overcoming a disagreement. For those with less intense support needs, this could simply involve provision of guidance on ways of managing conflict.

*'I quite like the idea of mediation because ... things do get really difficult and you're having so many arguments and ... access and maintenance are the two weapons that are used ... now legal aid been taken away ... there's no access to mediation ... and not many people know how to reach out for mediation to help them ... so I think mediation is a really good idea between both parents to see if they can sort something out.'*

(Newcastle, PWC, CSA lapsed FBA)

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### **5.2.5 Flexibility**

NRPs in particular would value the opportunity to introduce some flexibility into their agreement, and anticipated that this would help to ensure a more resilient FBA. PWCs had more mixed views on flexibility, with those in financial hardship being least in favour of flexibility. For NRPs, however, flexibility was a key benefit of FBAs, and support with this would be valued.

Suggestions to address this need were as follows. The intensity of support needs varied between parents, and the suggestions are listed in order of intensity, with the most intense support options listed first:

- caseworker involvement to agree changes with both parties;
- supported co-parent liaison, e.g. meeting spaces;
- regular review;
- guidelines on agreed protocols for delayed payments.

Communication was key to supporting parents to introduce flexibility into their arrangement. Where parents were more confident in their ability to communicate effectively with their co-parent, support needs were less intense. For those with the most intense support needs, individual caseworker support was thought to be required.

### **5.2.6 What's best for the child**

All parents aspired to setting up a mutually agreeable arrangement that would best meet the needs of their child. Successful FBAs were characterised by a focus on wider parental collaboration, and parents had differing support needs in relation to this.

Suggestions to address this need were as follows. The intensity of support needs varied between parents, and the suggestions are listed in order of intensity, with the most intense support options listed first:

- intervention to encourage NRP parental access;
- guidance on recommended norms for NRP parental access;
- suggested methods of regular co-parent communication on parenting;
- support with parenting activities.

At the most intense level, parents felt that external intervention would be required to encourage appropriate levels of parental access. This was felt both by PWCs whose co-parent did not have contact, and NRPs who were prevented from having parental access to their child. For those with less intense needs, support and guidance with parenting parental access for NRPs would be valued to help extend the arrangement beyond simple association with maintenance, to involve parental access and increased parental involvement for NRPs.

## **5.3 Timing of support**

Parents highlighted a number of concerns relating to the timing of any support for their FBA. As described in Section 3.4.3, prevention of conflict between co-parents tended to be more effective than attempting to resolve conflict after it had taken root. In addition, parents had a number of fears surrounding the transition from their current arrangement to a new

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arrangement following case closure. A number of key stages were identified where support was required, with specific suggestions for each stage:

### **Stage 1: transition stage**

This stage incorporated the period immediately before case closure when parents would first be informed about the need to make a new arrangement. The key need at this stage was for parents to feel reassured that their arrangement could transition effectively from their existing arrangement to a new arrangement with minimal disruption. Support would be required to help build confidence in the FBA for both parties, and to help them to make the right decisions about the details of the arrangement.

### **Stage 2: set up stage**

This stage occurred once parents had decided to set up a FBA, and needed to agree the terms of the FBA. At this stage, parents required support with brokering the details of the FBA. This should include supporting parents to discuss the amount, frequency and other terms of the arrangement. This would also involve discussion of other options that could be taken up if the FBA was to falter.

### **Stage 3: sustaining stage**

This stage occurred once the FBA had been set up and was operating effectively. The key support needs at this stage involved preventing lapses or conflicts. This could include support for the 'infrastructure' of the FBA, such as the mechanisms for making payments. This could also include building a record of evidence of payments to help to prevent future disputes.

### **Stage 4: crisis stage**

This stage occurred if co-parents found themselves in conflict or dispute in relation to the maintenance arrangement. At this stage, support would be required in the form of mediation or conflict resolution. In addition, official intervention in the form of options for enforcement would be required.

## **6 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. Parent's responses to the propositions are described in this section.

### **6.1 Context to proposition testing**

The propositions were tested amongst parents who had previously taken part in the Stage 1 research. There was a period of around eight to ten weeks between the two stages of fieldwork, and it became clear that during the intervening period parents had had an opportunity to consider case closure and the implications of this in greater depth. Differences emerged between Child Support Agency (CSA) customers and Child Maintenance (CM) Options customers in terms of communication needs relating to the transition to the new system.

#### **6.1.1 Child Support Agency customers**

##### **a) Fear factor**

Further consideration of case closure appeared to have had the effect of raising people's fears, particularly the potential for financial hardship, disruption and delay, and the risk of emotional pain resulting from conflict.

This fear factor had the effect of focusing parents on the core elements of a maintenance agreement such as security and clarity; and less on the aspirational elements of an arrangement. The stage 2 discussions therefore tended to emphasise fundamental issues such as ensuring that payments would be made as expected and on time, and that the arrangement could be set up smoothly avoiding delay and the risk of co-parent conflict. This represented a change in tone from the stage 1 discussions, where parents were more open to discussing aspirational elements of a maintenance agreement.

##### **b) Role of CSA experience**

For CSA customers, past experience of the CSA played a key role in their expectations from the new system. There was little or no awareness or experience of CM Options. Therefore when discussing options for support, parents tended to assume that the source of this support would be the CSA, even where CM Options was mentioned specifically as the likely source of support. In the absence of experience and understanding of CM Options, parents were skeptical that it would really be different to the service offered from the CSA.

In general, experiences of the CSA were poor, particularly in relation to their effectiveness and provision of telephone support (parents with care (PWCs)) and in their empathy with fathers (non-resident parents (NRPs)).

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*'It is the way the CSA came after me. They didn't care and were not being reasonable what so ever. They weren't willing to listen to me. I was trying to tell them that before you make a decision you should listen to my version and understand what my circumstances are. I wanted to show them the documentation and tell them about the arrangement. But they said you have seven days and if you don't pay then we have your NI number and we will go ahead directly. I even got to a manager to tell them they were being unreasonable. They didn't even send me an income and expenditure sheet. I thought of giving up my job. I would have been better off.'*

(Birmingham, NRP, CSA)

In addition, a great deal of uncertainty remained about the details of case closure, and there was a desire for more information. Parents were unclear about where they might go to receive this information. The CSA was seen as the main source of information and parents were disinclined to contact them because of past poor experiences.

*'When you call the CSA it depends who you are talking to. Some of them have a chip on their shoulder and are very rude. It is not consistent at all.'*

(Birmingham, PWC, CSA)

This led to stress and worry about case closure, and combined with the more general fear factor, led to a proportion of parents saying that they would be most likely to revert automatically to Collect & Pay, or that they would decide to exit the system altogether and avoid making a new arrangement.

### **c) Communication needs**

In order to feel more positive and constructive in their approach to the options for the future, it was clear that a shift in attitudes and expectations would be required, particularly to quash certain misconceptions and inform parents about the available support. Communications could play a role in alleviating fears and providing desired information.

Key communication needs were to build confidence in support options. In particular, parents valued the concept of an independent and impartial source of advice, but were unaware of CM Options. When asked whether they would be likely to contact CM Options, parents responded by describing their negative experiences of the CSA. It was clear that CM Options was confused with the CSA for some parents, and they were unaware of the distinction between the two. It is possible that long-term separated parents were less aware of CM Options as the service began after their separation.

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It was also important to develop parents' confidence in the new system, ensuring that they feel secure in the knowledge that the system will be effective in ensuring that maintenance arrangements are compliant.

Finally, it was evident that a fear factor had encouraged parents to focus on the security and clarity of their arrangement and consequently their interest and engagement in more aspirational elements reduced. These aspirational elements included wider collaboration with their co-parent for the benefit of their child(ren). To re-engage parents in these aspirational aspects, it would be important to first build confidence in the security of an arrangement. Once this had been established, parents would be more likely to engage with a positive message around the desirability of parental collaboration and the benefits of a FBA.

### **6.1.2 Child Maintenance Options customers**

CM Options customers had the lowest level of awareness and knowledge of their maintenance entitlements. CM Options customers tended to be unaware of the presence of support services, assuming that the only support that can be provided is in the form of enforceable statutory arrangements, which they prefer not to pursue. As described in Section 2.2, CM Options customers had often had very little contact with CM Options.

The lack of understanding around Direct Pay, coupled with negative experiences of CSA meant that some parents didn't think that the statutory scheme could offer any arrangement that would meet their needs.

CM Options customers have the least knowledge about potential sources of support, and the greatest misconceptions about CM Options. CM Options customers assumed that the service was for those seeking CSA support, or for those who were the most recently separated. For example, one CM Options customer thought that if she made a call to CM Options for advice, there was a risk that her co-parent would be contacted for maintenance by the CSA as a result.

Communication needs for CM Options customers relate to the potential role for the system in providing support to parents that does not necessarily relate to a formal statutory arrangement. CM Options customers would benefit from communications that describe a potential role for the system in extending the concept of maintenance beyond simply payments to incorporate wider collaboration. This would chime with their own view of the importance of parental collaboration.

It would also be important to highlight and promote the role of CM Options in providing independent impartial advice, as this would be a potential source of knowledge and awareness of rights and entitlements which CM Options customers are currently lacking.

## **6.2 Responses to the propositions**

The propositions were presented to parents in the form of a series of showcards . This section outlines parents' responses to each of the propositions.

## 6.2.1 Proposition 1: Communicating the benefits of Direct Pay

This proposition was communicated to parents via a showcard:

### **Showcard 4 - Alternative Arrangement**

- A way of working with your ex-partner to set up an effective child maintenance arrangement, which encourages you to work together to make your own arrangement, but with the safety net of legal enforcement.
- Under this arrangement, the Child Maintenance Service would calculate the amount of maintenance to be paid.
- Like family based arrangements, parents with this alternative arrangement would work together to arrange payments.
- The arrangements would be legally enforceable.
- To make such an arrangement, the person who make the application to the Child Maintenance Service has to pay a £20 application fee.
- The arrangements would be reviewed annually, free of charge. This means that any changes in the paying parent's income could be taken into account.
- Payments could be varied. For example, paying parents could pay 'top-ups' over and above the minimum amount calculated by the Child Maintenance Service.
- If paying parents were struggling to make payments, parents could discuss between them how to address the issue. For example parents could agree a smaller payment for one month, followed by top-ups.
- If parents were unable to resolve issues, then receiving parents can report maintenance not being paid and enforcement action could be taken by the Child Maintenance Service.

Although parents had been presented with information describing Direct Pay during Stage 1, it was clear that a number of aspects of Direct Pay had not been clearly understood. Stage 2 gave an opportunity to re-explain Direct Pay in terms of some of the important issues for parents highlighted in Stage 1. This proposition was received warmly, and had a broad appeal across a number of the sub-groups of the sample, with most saying that they would be likely to take up such an arrangement. The key benefit was thought to be the combination of parental collaboration that was offered, as parents were encouraged to work together to make their own arrangement; balanced with the security offered by the legal backing.

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*'This arrangement gives both sides a safety net. The main thing is that you are sitting down with your partners and working it out. This arrangement would take into account a father's circumstances. Because the current arrangement via the CSA doesn't.'*

(Birmingham, NRP, CSA)

*'I think the arrangement would be a good idea. It works well for both parents if the situation changes, but also gives the parent with the children legal back-up should they stop paying with no good reason.'*

(Bristol, PWC, CSA)

*'[A FBA] agreement between the two of you but that there's someone looking out for you both'*

(NRP, CSA, Newcastle)

Only those with the most difficult co-parent relationships felt that they would be unable to achieve the level of parental involvement required to set up a Direct Pay arrangement. These parents preferred to revert to a Collect & Pay arrangement, or no arrangement at all.

The key benefits of a Direct Pay arrangement were as follows:

- encourages communication between parents;
- flexibility in payments (NRPs);
- regular review;
- legal backing;
- provides earnings calculation.

For most parents, Direct Pay as communicated in the proposition provided the ideal level of external statutory support for their arrangement, whilst also enabling parents to discuss and define the arrangement between themselves. Some concerns were highlighted surrounding the proposition, as follows:

- agreement should include elements of non-financial collaboration such as parental access stipulations;
- for PWCs, there were some fears surrounding flexibility;
- some questioned the frequency of the annual review, suggesting that this should be more frequent to take account of changes in NRP income;
- some questioned the accuracy of the earnings calculation, especially in the case of self-employed NRPs;
- parents questioned the effectiveness and timeliness of enforcement.

A number of these concerns were based on negative experiences of the CSA, highlighting the need to build confidence in key elements of the new system, to reduce the possibility of Case Closure customers exiting the system entirely.

## 6.2.2 Proposition 2: Dealing with key triggers of conflict

This proposition was communicated to parents via two showcards:

### Showcard 12

- CM Options provides free and impartial advice for separated parents.
- You can contact them for support at **any time**, even if you have been separated for a number of years, and even if you already have an arrangement (such as a FBA) in place at any time.
- If a parent contacts CM Options for support with problems regarding an existing family based arrangement, they would receive impartial information and support.
- CM Options staff will explore the parents' specific situation, and provide the right kind of advice for each person. They will also tell them about other places that they could go to for support.
- They are trained in identifying different options that may help parents overcome certain barriers including communication difficulties, dealing with problems or arguments, and talking about money.
- CM Options can also offer 'extended support' where they set goals with customers and help them to sustain a family based arrangement. CM Options would arrange to call the parent at an agreed time to check in with the parent and on progress towards meeting the goal that was set during the last conversation. Customers can benefit from up to 5 of these phone calls.

### Showcard 13

- More information could be provided in the family-based arrangement form about what parents can do if they are worried about their arrangement breaking down. This could include:
- More information and support to help parents when they experience problems to help to reduce those problems
- A section in the form that helps parents to agree a 'plan of action' for tackling problems with family based arrangements
- This section would include suggested courses of action such as agreeing to meet in a neutral venue to discuss problems, or both parties speaking to CM Options to understand what they could do to resolve their differences

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The responses to this proposition were polarised between those with few difficulties in the co-parent relationship, and those with a longer history of unresolved acrimony. For most, this proposition did not offer the intensity of support that would be required in a period of conflict. For others, a key issue was the lack of knowledge and understanding of CM Options. As parents were not aware of the support offered by CM Options, they lacked any positive reason to contact CM Options during times of conflict, and could not envisage doing so, or the benefits of this. This included CM Options customers with an existing family-based arrangement (FBA), who lacked a reason to consider contacting CM Options as they were not aware of the support that they would offer. As well as the lack of a positive trigger to contacting CM Options, there were barriers to contacting CM Options for those who equated it with the CSA.

In addition, parents were unfamiliar with the FBA form, and could not envisage it supporting them during times of conflict, as it appeared too informal to have the appropriate gravitas to support conflict resolution.

The key benefits of conflict resolution were as follows:

- the concept of impartial information and support from a neutral third party was positively received in principle;
- this was particularly the case if the support staff would be friendly, non-judgemental and knowledgeable

Key concerns were as follows:

- lack of understanding of the role of CM Options in child maintenance;
- doubts as to the quality of support that might be offered by CM Options, based on experience of CSA.

It was difficult to envisage the role of the FBA form in resolving conflict between parents. Although parents understood in principle the potential benefits of a resource to support them during times of conflict, it was difficult to envisage the value of this in the absence of a clear understanding of CM Options or the FBA form.

*‘This is very helpful in a way you are not left alone. When things could change you may need the support as it can be overwhelming. It is helpful as a safety net, should parents have a break- down in communication. The parents with this option can have the support to maintain communication.’*

(London, NRP, CSA)

### 6.2.3 Proposition 3: Helping customers make contact with their ex-partner

This proposition was communicated to parents via two showcards:

#### **Showcard 5 - tracing ex partner**

- If you have the full name of your ex-partner, the Child Maintenance Service can attempt to trace your ex-partner.
- In a significant proportion of cases, the Child Maintenance Service are successful in tracing ex-partners.
- To use this service, you have to make a child maintenance application through the Child Maintenance Service. There is a £20 application fee.

#### **Showcard 6 - letter**

- When you speak to CM Options, you could request a 'making contact' letter. CM Options would send the letter to you, which you could then sign and send on to your ex-partner yourself. The letter would say:
- That you have had contact with CM Options regarding the different types of maintenance arrangement available to you
- It will provide a brief explanation of the benefits of a family based arrangement, and explain that you would like to explore setting up a Family Based Arrangement with your ex-partner
- The letter will have the CM Options logo and contact details, and some information about other support offered by CM Options, to encourage your ex-partner to contact CM Options if they would like further information and support.

Parents understood that the propositions aimed to support parents in making contact in order to set up a maintenance agreement. The interventions described were thought to be a good idea in principle, but most could not envisage using these. In the case of the tracing service, this was because it had limited relevance, as parents already knew the whereabouts of their co-parent. For the making contact letter, this was because parents found it difficult to envisage a letter sent from them to their co-parent on the topic of maintenance.

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### **a) Tracing service**

Responses to the concept of the tracing service were generally positive or neutral. This is because it had limited direct relevance to parents who were usually aware of their co-parent's address. The letter was thought to be a good idea in principle for those who needed to make contact with their co-parent.

Parents also raised one or two concerns about the letter, although these were not mentioned frequently:

- Shouldn't be targeted only at men. What about PWCs who refuse parental access?
- Will data protection be respected?
- Will the fee for the service be refunded if the service doesn't work?

Parents did not fully understand the role of fees across the propositions, and some assumed that a standalone fee would be levied for each service. It is possible that, had parents understood that the £20 fee was a flat fee for the application to the 2012 scheme, which also covered the costs of managing the case, annual reviews and so on, then this would have been viewed more positively.

### **b) Making contact letter**

Responses to the making contact letter differed depending on the nature of the co-parent relationship. For those with the poorest relationships, it was difficult to envisage sending a letter to their co-parent, and they wondered whether this would have any effect on their co-parent, or whether it might simply be ignored.

For those with a better co-parent relationship, it was difficult for parents to predict how such a letter might be received by the co-parent. A key concern was that the letter might be seen as an act of aggression or provocation, and this would particularly be the case where the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) logo was included. This led to fears that a finely balanced co-parent relationship might be disrupted by the sending of such a letter. This was particularly the case for CM Options PWCs who had not previously engaged with the statutory system in any form due to the risk of disrupting their co-parent relationship.

Parents had a number of suggestions for the content of such a letter:

- the letter should focus on the child's welfare;
- it should place a value on shared parental responsibility;
- the letter should originate from a neutral third party, rather than from a co-parent;
- the letter should indicate that the payment of maintenance is important and expected.

There were differences between parents in their preferences for the emphasis of the letter, with some preferring a 'soft' positioning for the letter, avoiding discussion of maintenance for fear of antagonising their co-parent. Others preferred a 'harder' message designed to engage their co-parent with shared parental responsibility.

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*'It's good (the letter), but if they wanted to add something, they should just maybe add the importance of both parents being in the children's lives...it's not just all about the money, the support they give their children (is important.)'*

(London, PWC, CM Options)

*'It's a gamble, what if he stops putting money into my account? (because of receiving the letter) It's not just about me, I have to think about my daughter and we're alright, do I really want to rock the boat?'*

(Bristol, PWC, CM Options)

### 6.2.4 Proposition 4: Virtual meeting space

This proposition was communicated to parents via a showcard:

#### Showcard 7

- CM Options could arrange for parents to meet each other on the telephone or online, to talk about child maintenance.
- These meetings could involve only the parents themselves, OR
- To make sure parents treat each other with respect, these meetings could be moderated by independent third parties, such as a mutual friend or someone from CM Options.
- These meetings could also involve mediation to help parents with their maintenance arrangement. This would involve trained mediators and these sessions would need to be paid for.

Parents understood that the aim of the virtual meeting space was to support collaboration and communication between parents. The idea of support to enable parents to communicate with each other was liked and valued in principle. However, a face-to-face meeting space was strongly preferred, and parents did not respond well to the idea of the meeting taking place online or via telephone. In addition, the cost aspect of the virtual meeting space proposition was not well understood, and parents tended to assume that the cost applied to the virtual meeting space element specifically, rather than to engagement with the statutory system as a whole. Parents responded negatively to the idea of paying for mediation, and felt that such a service should not require payment. None said that they would be likely to pay for such a service.

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Two key issues emerged in relation to the online or telephone meeting space proposition: format, and facilitation.

### **a) Format**

Parents responded negatively to the concept of the meeting space being online or on the telephone, with almost all preferring that this should be face-to-face. The nature of the online meeting was not specified in the proposition, but during the discussion it was understood that an online meeting could involve a visual format where participants could see each other on screen. Parents did not generally have a great deal of experience of online meetings, and did not feel particularly comfortable or familiar with this. For these parents, there were barriers in the form of lack of skills and confidence with online meeting spaces. However, online or telephone meetings were also thought to restrict open communication, and to lack the formality required for a discussion about maintenance. Parents worried that promises made in such an environment might be less likely to be fulfilled in the 'real' world.

A face-to-face discussion, however, was very appealing across all sample sub-groups, and would enable parents to hold a complex discussion about maintenance where both parties were held fully accountable. Parents assumed that a neutral facilitator would be present during such a discussion.

### **b) Facilitation**

Parents mentioned spontaneously that facilitation was a key requirement of the meeting space concept. However, it became clear that in most cases this referred simply to the presence of a neutral third party rather than to a trained facilitator, counsellor or mediator. A key need for meetings surrounding maintenance was for parents to feel that they would be respected, and that acceptable behaviour would be maintained. A neutral third party would be responsible for guiding parents through a discussion, ensuring that key points were covered, setting ground rules, and recording the discussion.

For parents with more intensive support needs, however, it was likely that mediation conducted by a trained individual would be necessary. This is because acrimonious dispute was very likely to arise, giving rise to a need for moderation, advice and arbitration as part of the maintenance discussion.

### **c) Additions to the proposition**

Parents suggested a number of potential developments to add to the value of the virtual meeting space proposition:

- virtual meeting space should potentially provide scope to discuss non-financial elements of collaboration such as parental access;
- clear goals should be set from the outset of the discussion, support could be provided to set these goals;
- a discussion guide could be provided to help steer parents through their conversation.

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*'This service will open the door for a better working relationship; mediation will help break down barriers and come to a common ground .... However, I am unemployed and have no money. I won't be able to pay for this service even though I know this will help me see my child.'*

(Birmingham, NRP, CSA)

*'I want to see him in front of me with somebody else there, that's come to an agreement cos they can say whatever they want on the phone. He can say I give her such and such every week, which is not true, you can't watch me in front of my face and tell me you give me that when you didn't...on the telephone he could say anything...You just need that third party, someone else there, as a witness, someone who can lead the discussion, otherwise he'll be looking at you and you'll be looking at him. You don't know where to start...and both the parents, they can maybe come with jotted notes and maybe give that third person a copy of it before they start the discussion, so they know what you need to cover in case you do forget.'*

(London, PWC, CM Options)

### 6.2.5 Proposition 5: Family-based arrangement form

This proposition was communicated to parents via a showcard:

**Showcard 8**

<b>A Our children who we're responsible for</b>	<b>B The parents who made this arrangement and agree to follow it</b>
<p><b>Our first child</b></p> <p>Full name <input type="text"/></p> <p>Date of birth <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/></p> <p>Address <input type="text"/></p>	<p><b>Mother</b></p> <p>Full name <input type="text"/></p> <p>Address <input type="text"/></p> <p>Phone <input type="text"/></p> <p>Email <input type="text"/></p> <p>Weekly income £ <input type="text"/></p>
<p><b>Our second child</b></p> <p>Full name <input type="text"/></p> <p>Date of birth <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/></p> <p>Address <input type="text"/></p>	<p><b>Father</b></p> <p>Full name <input type="text"/></p> <p>Address <input type="text"/></p> <p>Phone <input type="text"/></p> <p>Email <input type="text"/></p> <p>Weekly income £ <input type="text"/></p>
<p><b>Our third child</b></p> <p>Full name <input type="text"/></p> <p>Date of birth <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/></p> <p>Address <input type="text"/></p>	

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

C The payments	D Our promise
<p>If you need help working out the amount of maintenance to pay, use our online calculator at <a href="http://cmoptions.org">cmoptions.org</a> or call us on <b>0800 988 0988*</b>.</p> <p><b>For our first child</b></p> <p>Who pays? <input type="text"/></p> <p>How much? £ <input type="text"/></p> <p>How often? <input type="text"/> <small>(for example: once a week, once a month, twice a year)</small></p> <p>Date for payment? <input type="text"/> <small>(for example: every Friday, last working day of the month)</small></p> <p>First payable date <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/></p> <p>How paid? <input type="text"/> <small>(for example: cash, cheque, standing order)</small></p> <p>How did we decide on this amount? <input type="text"/></p> <p><b>Payments 'in kind'</b></p> <p>For what? <input type="text"/> <small>(for example: holidays, school fees, uniforms, books, clothes)</small></p> <p>Value? £ <input type="text"/></p> <p>How often? <input type="text"/> <small>(for example: once a week, once a month, twice a year)</small></p> <p>Review date <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/></p>	<p>We've both read this arrangement carefully, and agreed to it. By signing here, we promise to keep to the arrangement, for the sake of our children. If either of us is unable to keep to this arrangement, for any reason, we agree to let the other parent know.</p> <p><b>Mother</b></p> <p>Signed <input type="text"/></p> <p>Name <input type="text"/></p> <p>Date <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/></p> <hr/> <p><b>Father</b></p> <p>Signed <input type="text"/></p> <p>Name <input type="text"/></p> <p>Date <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/></p> <p>This is not a legal document, but signing this arrangement is a clear statement of our commitment to our children.</p> <p>Review date <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/> / <input type="text"/></p>

Parents interpreted the role of the FBA form in a number of ways, depending on the quality of their co-parent relationship. Those with the most difficult relationships thought that the level of cooperation required to achieve mutual agreement and completion of such a form was unrealistic. This group were most likely to revert to Collect & Pay following case closure, and had a strongly negative and hostile reaction to the testing of the form, highlighting the need for careful targeting of interventions according to parents' needs.

*'I really find it patronising coming from someone not in my situation ... we've got this option and this option and after that it's I don't know what more we can do for you. That's what basically I've been told for 9 years ... I think it should be according to people's situations like somebody doesn't need family-based (arrangement) don't offer that because she doesn't need it no matter how much you put it in her face, if she doesn't need it, she doesn't need it. If she needs legal help or...if there's a legal paper that you can give somebody ... then give her that but don't use the same brush everyone.'*

(London, PWC, CSA)

Others with more positive co-parent relationships liked the concept of the form, and a paper record of payments. However, this group queried the lack of legal backing and the informality of the form. The prominent statement on the form about the lack of legal status seemed to undermine its status. This group would prefer a 'harder' positioning for the form, with an element of legal backing.

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*'I just think that by him (ex-partner) not signing that (FBA form) it's not going to make a huge difference and at the bottom of it, it says 'this is not a legal document', so why should they (ex-partner) take you seriously?'*

(London, PWC, CM Options)

Those who responded most positively to the form were NRPs who tended to favour informality in arrangements, and CM Options PWCs who also preferred not to engage with the statutory system. The form was also of interest to those who already had a working FBA in place, as it would provide a useful record of payments. This group tended to prefer the 'soft' positioning of the form, as it respected their ability to make a mutual agreement without legal backing.

*'It is lot more than a piece of paper. It is your commitment. It is not a legal document, but I think it can be challenged if you don't keep up the payments. You are committing to it just by signing the form.'*

(Birmingham, NRP, CSA)

*'I never had that kind of support [FBA] when we first got separated. But this is a good tool, guide to work from.'*

(NRP, CSA, Newcastle)

Parents were presented with a number of logos of different organisations which might be featured on the FBA form.

### Showcard 11

The logos were for the following organisations;

- Department for Work & Pensions
- Gingerbread
- Netmums.com
- Relate
- Family Lives
- Cafcass
- National Family Mediation
- Dad.info

In general, there were low levels of recognition of the organisations other than the DWP, and parents said that the DWP logo is the one that they would prefer to see on the form. This is because the DWP logo was the most recognisable, and communicated the desired weight and credibility to support the FBA form.

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*'This would be good because you don't mess with DWP. Everybody is scared of the DWP. All the charities and all are soft options. No one will take them seriously.'*

(Birmingham, PWC, CSA)

### 6.2.6 Proposition 6: Impartial information and support (CM Options service)

This proposition was communicated to parents via a showcard:



The showcard features the 'Child Maintenance options' logo at the top left. The main title is 'Child Maintenance Options'. Below this, there are six rows, each with an icon and a text box:

	Parents must contact Child Maintenance Options before they apply to use the Child Maintenance Service.
	Free impartial information, guidance & support.
	Signposting to other support services.
	<a href="http://www.cmoptions.org">www.cmoptions.org</a>
	Call FREE on 0800 988 0988
	Live web-chat on the internet

Parents had had little or no awareness of the CM Options service prior to the research. The CM Options concept was well received in principle, with parents responding positively to the idea of a friendly and impartial advice service providing information and support on child maintenance.

*'It is good because it offers support to parents when it is time to change the arrangement.'*

(London, NRP, CSA)

During discussion, however, a number of barriers emerged to engaging with CM Options, and these appeared to be based on misconceptions about the service. A key barrier came in the form of negative expectations of CM Options based on past poor experience of the CSA. Parents assumed that CM Options would offer a similar style of advice to that provided by CSA, and negative past experience of this deterred parents from contacting CM Options. The impact of negative past experience of the CSA is discussed in detail in Section 6.1.1). Even for those without a negative past experience of the CSA, expectations of a government-backed service were automatically based on the CSA, so that they found

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it difficult to envisage a role for a government service that did not relate specifically to a statutory maintenance agreement. This was a barrier particularly for CM Options customers who preferred not to engage with the statutory system. It was clear that such barriers could lead to a risk that parents would not engage with CM Options at case closure.

The key benefits for the CM options concept can be summarised as follows:

- emphasis on information and support for parents in setting up a collaborative arrangement;
- offers general support, not just that relating to child maintenance;
- a supportive and empathetic attitude;
- individualised, tailored support based on a historic knowledge of your case;
- response to queries about case closure.

These benefits, where they were fully recognised by parents, were highly valued in supporting them to set up and sustain an arrangement.

A number of barriers and concerns were expressed which could discourage parents from engaging with CM Options:

- Can I contact CM Options even though I am long-term separated, an NRP or do not have a statutory arrangement?
- Will CM Options be truly independent?
- Will CM Options have NRP interests in mind as well as PWCs?
- Will they have enough understanding of the details of my individual case?
- Will they have the level of knowledge required to respond to my queries?
- Will CM Options be friendly and understanding?

A proportion of parents were simply unaware that they were entitled to contact CM Options, and thought that the service may only be open to those who were recently separated, or who had a statutory arrangement.

## **7 Overall conclusions**

Parents were motivated to avoid disruption and change in their maintenance arrangement, and fear of disruption tended to have an impact on responses to case closure. Such fears tended to encourage parents to focus on obtaining a secure arrangement which was clearly understood by both parties. Parents also valued collaboration and the concept of an arrangement that would benefit their child in various ways, as well as financially. This could include collaboration in various aspects of parenting. The extent to which such collaboration was seen as realistic or achievable varied widely, depending on the quality of the co-parent relationship.

An ideal arrangement was one which could meet core needs for security and clarity, and which could also satisfy the desire to collaborate to benefit their child. In this context, Direct Pay tended to have the greatest appeal, incorporating elements of collaboration as well as offering the security of enforcement, and also the clear lines of responsibility offered by any statutory arrangement. The exception to this came in the form of parents who had no desire to collaborate with their co-parent under any circumstances, usually Child Support Agency (CSA) parents with care (PWCs). Such parents would be likely to opt for Collect and Pay.

NRPs tended to be most in favour of family-based arrangements (FBAs) or informal arrangements, as they were seen to offer most flexibility and control. Child Maintenance (CM) Options customers (PWCs) also preferred informal arrangements, although often this was not a truly satisfactory arrangement, but rather an evasion of the issue in order to avoid risking co-parent conflict.

A number of priorities emerged from the research for future communications and support for long-term separated parents during the transition to the new system. These were as follows:

### **7.2.1 Promoting CM Options**

The CM Options service underpinned a number of interventions or measures offered to support parents transitioning to the new system. It was clear that CM Options was not known to long-term separated parents, but that it was liked in concept. Despite this, parents had some concerns that CM Options would be similar to, or linked with, the CSA. They also worried that CM Options was mainly relevant for newly separated parents. It was clear that this could lead to a risk of parents not engaging with CM Options at case closure. Of most concern were the CM Options customers who feared that a call to CM Options would be tantamount to a CSA application, something that they wished to avoid at all costs. This was of concern particularly as these parents were in most need of increasing knowledge and awareness of their rights. It is possible that increasing awareness of CM Options would enable people to deepen their understanding of the various options, and choose from these in a more informed way.

### **7.2.2 Clarifying fees**

The concept of introducing fees for the CMS 2012 scheme was received negatively and thought to penalise separated parents. It was clear that for some parents, however, a statutory arrangement was of value, and the price for ensuring security and clarity was worth paying. Parents did not always fully understand that the fees offered parental access to all aspects of the statutory system (including tracing services, annual review and so on), and they therefore did not realise the extent of the value offered as a result.

### **7.2.3 Timeliness of support**

It was clear that support offered at an early stage was likely to be of most value, and this was two-fold. First, in building parents' confidence and belief in their maintenance arrangement, such that they trusted that the agreement was secure and sustainable, and that support would be offered if there was any risk to the arrangement. This would help to prevent automatic reversion to the statutory system. Second, in targeting support to help prevent conflict before it could threaten the arrangement and result in a breakdown of relations between co-parents, as such relationships were crucial in enabling a collaborative and sustainable arrangement.

### **7.2.4 Targeting support**

Parents differed widely in terms of their capacity to set up a maintenance arrangement with an element of collaboration, and they also differed in the intensity of their support needs. It was clear that targeting was required in order to ensure that parents did not experience additional stress and worry through inappropriate targeting of support.

### **7.2.5 Preferred elements of support**

Parents valued the concept of support from an intermediary such as a trained facilitator during times of conflict between co-parents. In addition, the CM Options service was valued in concept, although reassurances were required that the service would be truly impartial and offer high quality information and support.

# Appendix

## **A.1 Detailed methodology**

### **A.1.1 Mini-groups**

All mini-groups contained three to six participants and lasted for 90 minutes. Mini-group discussions provide a smaller forum than traditional focus groups bringing the following benefits:

- faster and greater group cohesion: this provides valuable group dynamics, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as separation;
- idea generation: mini-groups provide a lively environment, suitable for generating ideas and reviewing proposition content;
- greater 'air time' for each participant: most participants have complex child maintenance arrangements and it is important to allow people to fully express their views and experiences.

### **A.1.2 Paired depths**

All paired depths contained two participants and lasted for 60 minutes. Paired depths provide:

- depth and scope: to fully explore and understand complex child maintenance arrangements and experiences;
- detail: Providing individualised feedback on the propositions;
- supportive environment: particularly for participants who have sensitive cases.

### A.1.3 Achieved Sample – Stages 1 and 2

#### Stage 1 CSA sample

Method	Receivers (PWC female)	Payers (NRP male)
<b>Mini-group</b> <b>3 – 6 parents</b> <b>90 minutes in length</b>	Collection Service 5 years + separation Non-compliant cases	Collection Service 5 years + separation Compliant cases
	Maintenance Direct 2–5 years and 5 years + separation Non-compliant cases	Collection Service 2–5 years separation Non-compliant cases
	Maintenance Direct 5 years + separation Compliant cases 2 x lapsed FBA	Maintenance Direct 2–5 years separation Compliant and non-compliant cases 2 x lapsed FBA
<b>Depths</b> <b>Interview with 1 or 2 parents</b> <b>60 minutes in length</b>	2 x female receivers	2 x male payers
	3 x female receivers Lapsed FBA	1 x male receiver
		2 x male payers Lapsed FBA

#### Stage 1 CM Options sample

Method	FBA in place	Lapsed FBA
<b>Mini-group</b> <b>3–6 parents</b> <b>90 minutes in length</b>	Mix of 1–5 years separation and 5 years + separation	
<b>Depths</b> <b>Interview with 1 or 2 parents</b> <b>60 minutes in length</b>	4 x 1–5 years separation	3 x 1–5 years separation
	4 x 5 years + separation	1 x 5+ years separation

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**Stage 2 CSA sample**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Receivers (PWC female)</b>	<b>Payers (NRP male)</b>
<b>Mini-group</b> <b>3–6 parents</b> <b>90 minutes in length</b>	1 x London  Included Maintenance Direct, lapsed FBA and Collection Service	1 x London  Included lapsed FBA and Collection Service
	1 x Birmingham  Included Maintenance Direct, lapsed FBA and Collection Service	1 x Bristol  Included Maintenance Direct and lapsed FBA
<b>Paired depth</b> <b>Interview with 2 parents</b>		1 x Birmingham

**Stage 2 CM Options sample**

<b>Method</b>	<b>CM Options sample</b>
<b>Mini-group</b> <b>3–6 parents</b> <b>90 minutes in length</b>	1 x London
	1 x Bristol
<b>Paired depth</b> <b>Interview with 2 parents</b>	1 x Birmingham
<b>Depths</b> <b>Interview with 1 parent</b> <b>60 minutes in length</b>	1 x London
	1 x Birmingham

**A.1.4 Sampling issues**

During the course of the project recruitment, some challenges were encountered which resulted in a change to the sampling approach. These challenges occurred during Stage 1 recruitment, and no similar challenges were encountered during Stage 2. These challenges are described below, as well as some suggested reasons why these may have occurred, and the remedies that were taken to address them in this study. The challenges encountered were as follows:

- Maintenance Direct (MD) customers. We were not able to recruit the required number of MD customers with the appropriate characteristics of compliant/non-compliant; or shorter/ longer separation.
- Lapsed family-based arrangements (FBA). We were unable to recruit the required numbers of customers with a lapsed FBA.

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The reasons for these challenges were as follows:

- The initial sampling process was unable to supply sufficient client numbers to us in order for us to convert these into interviews.
- The contact list had a high level of unobtainable numbers, suggesting that telephone contact information was out of date for long-term separated parents who may not have had contact with the service for some time.
- Misunderstanding of the definition of FBA. It became clear during recruitment screening and as fieldwork began, that participants had understood and interpreted the concept of a FBA in different ways. This had the effect that some participants felt that they did not have a FBA and would answer no to this during screening, where others with an identical arrangement felt that they did have a FBA.
- Customer perception of compliance. The contact details provided indicated compliance or non-compliance of an arrangement. However, during recruitment screening and initial fieldwork, it became clear that some people felt that their arrangement was compliant where the contact details indicated otherwise. Alternatively, they had a working FBA, although contact details suggested they had a non-compliant statutory arrangement.
- Lower levels of agreement to participate, and lower levels of attendance at planned research sessions. A number of people refused to participate, or initially agreed and subsequently cancelled prior to the fieldwork, and some did not turn up at the appointment time. This is to be expected when recruiting for research, and the level of agreement and turnout was as expected or slightly higher than would be normally expected from this type of recruitment. We did not identify any issues in the recruitment process which would have affected this. However, there were a number of other factors which may have reduced levels of agreement and attendance. Chief amongst these was holding the research during school holidays when parents found it difficult to find alternative options for childcare to enable them to take part. Another factor was reticence to take part in the research due to fears about the consequences of taking part. It was noted that agreement to participate in Stage 2 of the research was extremely high. At Stage 2, participants had already taken part in a previous stage and were by definition familiar with the research process. It was suggested that this difference might have resulted from additional trust that had been developed in the research process as a result of taking part in the Stage 1. Another possibility is that participants were more motivated to take part once they were confident that their participation could help contribute to positive change through influencing the support provided to separated parents.
- These challenges were overcome by mixing quotas where it had originally been intended to separate groups. For example, some of the Maintenance Direct groups in Stage 1 included a range of lengths of separation where the original intention had been to hold separate sessions. As length of separation did not appear to be an important driver of behaviour in other groups, we do not believe that this had any detrimental effect on the overall study.
- In addition, it is worth noting that some CM Options customers had not in fact made any proactive contact with CM Options, but tended to have received a phone call from CM Options during a new benefit claim. The implications of this are discussed further in Section 2.2.

## A.2 Interview material describing a FBA

A **family-based arrangement** is set up by you and the other parent, the Child Maintenance Service are not involved:

- There are no fees or charges.
- You decide and agree with the other parent how payments are made and received.
- For example, the arrangement could involve payment of a regular amount of money, or providing things like school uniforms directly.
- This is not a legally binding arrangement and the Child Maintenance Service advises that a record of payments is kept, such as using a Standing Order or the Family Based Arrangement Form from CM Options
- If there are problems that cannot be resolved CM Options can help you and you can still apply to the Child Maintenance Service.