Separated families: how mainstream services support disadvantaged children and their non-resident parents
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the research

Services supporting children who live in or near poverty have been developed around the idea of the nuclear family, with the caring role assigned to one parent (normally the mother) and the earning role assigned to the other (normally the father). When parents separate, benefits and allowances to support such families attach wholly to one parent or the other. The two-parent family thus becomes a ‘one parent family’ and the non-resident parent often becomes invisible, other than as a source of income. About a third of all children lose contact with their non-resident parent, yet there is an increasing body of evidence which suggests that a good relationship and regular contact with a non-resident father is associated with better social, cognitive and behavioural outcomes for children, including improved school attainment, reduced delinquency and lower levels of emotional distress. For non-resident fathers, too, maintaining contact with children is associated with reduced distress and fewer psychological difficulties.

The aim of this study was to explore what might be done to support the involvement of non-resident parents – and especially those with a low income – so that they are better able to meet the needs of their children.

Although the research concerns both mothers and fathers as non-resident parents, fathers constitute the overwhelming majority of non-resident parents and thus fathering forms an important focus for the work. Fatherhood is an area that has received increasing attention from policy makers, which has contributed to a shift in the meaning of fatherhood. Lewis et al (2002) suggest that since the 1970s, the mounting costs to the State of supporting lone mothers and children has led to an emphasis on the responsibility of non-resident fathers to provide financially for their biological children. Consequently, fatherhood has become increasingly synonymous with the provision of financial support at the cost of other forms of parental caring.

Conversely, more recent Government initiatives to support families suggest a shift towards recognising the broader role that fathers play in their children’s lives. For example the Department of Health commissioned a report on working with fathers (Ryan 2000), and the Department of Education and Skills has developed a website for fathers to encourage their involvement with sons (DfES 2003). Funding for contact centres, provision of more family-friendly, flexible working patterns for parents with young or disabled children and the extension of paternal leave have all been part of the move to encourage fathers’ involvement. Every Child Matters (HM Treasury, 2003) proposed support services for fathers living apart from their children to facilitate positive relationships between children and both parents.

However, fathers in general remain one of the groups who have difficulty accessing services (Ghate, Shaw and Hazel, 2000) and non-resident parents have become classified as one of the ‘hard to reach’ group of potential service users (Quinton, 2004). As with many areas of parenting support, barriers to service use by non-resident parents may involve lack of awareness of what support exists, practical problems such as clashes with employment hours, attitudinal problems stemming from the assumption that
parenting is the domain of women, and structural problems involving staff gender and female-orientated methods of working. The first steps in identifying what can be done to encourage and support non-resident parent involves exploring what non-resident fathers – and their families – need in the way of services to help them remain in touch with their children, and what existing services are currently contributing in the way of support.

1.2. Aims and objectives of the study

The overall aim of the research was to develop an understanding of how the needs of children in low-income separated families might best be met, and in particular to shed light on how services, and especially mainstream services, could facilitate the role of non-resident parents in meeting those needs.

The study had the following objectives:

- To describe the needs of children aged between seven and 16 in different types of separated families, as seen by children, parents and service providers
- To describe the needs of non-resident parents and resident parents in separated families, as seen by parents themselves and by service providers
- To provide a picture of the current services available to non-resident parents to facilitate their involvement with children
- To explore how far these services are meeting their needs, from the perception of children, the non-resident parents, resident parents and service providers
- To make recommendations for ways in which policy and practice can better meet the needs of non-resident parents and their children.

This study focused on mainstream statutory and voluntary services that parents and children might use on a day-to-day basis, such as education and health services. Although the intention was not to explore those services specifically for separating and separated parents, in reality these were often the only type of provision that families were able to discuss, and they have, therefore, been included. However, it should be stressed that this is not an evaluation of any of these services and it was not the remit of the study to measure their effectiveness.

1.3. Methodology

There were three main strands to the research:

- A review of the relevant literature in this field
- A qualitative study of non-resident parents, resident parents and children in separated families in eight economically deprived locations in England and Wales
- A qualitative study of providers of key mainstream services in these locations, focusing on what services were available, what service providers understood to be the needs of non-resident parents, and how services could be better configured to help non-resident parents and their children.
The fourth strand of the project as whole was dissemination of the findings to draw attention to the issues and to influence policy. This strand was carried out by Duncan Fisher at the Fatherhood Institute

1.3.1. The literature review
This was a comprehensive exploration of the following topics.

- The needs of children and parents, and especially those who are non-resident resident, in separated families
- Current policy and socio-legal context in relation to non-resident parents, in England and in Wales
- Services/programmes in the UK which have been developed to address the needs of non-resident parent and their children
- Services/programmes in the USA and Europe that have been developed to address the needs of non-resident parent and their children
- Recommendations that stem from the existing literature.

The data collection involved three main sources:

**Database and web searches.** Searches of the following type of databases, using relevant combinations of terms:

- Article databases (e.g. MEDLINE, EMBASE, Sociofile, PsycINFO, Social Science Citation Index) and the Cochrane Library.
- Specialist ‘child’ focused library databases (incl. National Children’s Bureau’s ‘ChildData’, NSPCC, PRB, Nacro, ERIC).
- Internet search-engines (incl. Google, Lycos, Webcrawler) and specialist websites

**Reference trails.** Reference lists and bibliographies from each collected article were examined and, where relevant, were traced

**Contact with relevant researchers and policy and practice staff.** We were able to capitalise on our wide network of contacts in the field to point us in the direction of relevant studies.

1.3.2. A qualitative study of low-income separated families
The aim was to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with separated families, consisting of one child aged between seven and 16 and his/her resident and non-resident parents in eight local authority areas, six in England and two in Wales. Areas were selected to cover between them a range of geographical regions (North, South, Midlands), and urban/rural locations. Because the focus of the study was on disadvantaged families, local authorities were selected from those containing wards with Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) scores in the bottom quartile (25%) of the distribution for England and Wales as a whole.

The intention was to select low-income families from these areas who represented a range of varying life circumstances. The sample was divided between a ‘community sample’ and a ‘high conflict’ sample. This was to ensure that the sample contained a mix
of families in which decisions about residence and contact had been resolved in different ways and in which there were varying degrees of tension between the parents. On the assumption that families were less likely to want to be involved in the research where their situation was especially tense or conflictual, it was decided that the community sample should be larger than the high conflict sample.

**Sampling families**

*The community sample*

Families in each area were to be sampled using standard qualitative purposive techniques, and recruited from local communities by professional recruiters working to a specification set out by the research team.

In each area, recruiters were asked to find four families with a range of characteristics, so that across the sample of 32 families as a whole we would include:

- Children at different stages of development (pre-school, primary school and secondary school age)
- Children living in households headed by a lone carer (ie, the resident parent has not re-partnered)
- Families where the non-resident parent had never lived with their children
- Families where the *resident parent* had re-partnered (so-called ‘reconstituted’ families).
- Families where the *non-resident parent* had re-partnered

Other factors that we wished to form part of the specification were ethnicity, sex of children, and, if possible, the length of time since separation, in order to ensure a good cross-section of characteristics and life circumstances across the sample as whole.

A reputable research fieldwork and recruitment agency which had been successfully used in previous research was employed for this part of the sample selection. Professional recruiters based in the selected areas were given a ‘quota’ of families to find with specific characteristics, so that across the sample of families as a whole we had a good cross-section of families with the characteristics of interest. The task of recruiters was to approach families and secure permission for the researchers to make contact with them.

The researchers themselves then contacted the family member (almost always a resident mother) and gave more details about the study purpose, ethical protocol and what was involved for the family. Researchers explained that, where possible, we wished to invite at least one child to take part in a separate interview, provided that both the parent and the child gave their informed consent. It was also explained that we wished to have contact details for the non-resident parent, whom we approached separately for an interview.

*The sample of high conflict cases*

In each area we also wished to interview at least one family in which there had been high conflict following separation. Cafcass was approached with a request for us to be able to
approach staff in the selected areas and ask them to identify appropriate cases. We were looking for cases in which there had been serious conflict about the post-separation arrangements regarding residence of or contact with the children, but where the cases were now closed. This was to avoid any danger of research contaminating an ongoing case. Cafcass staff were asked to approach the family on our behalf with an invitation to participate in the study. Where families agreed to this, contact details were passed to the research team to make arrangements for interview.

**Difficulties encountered**

The aim was to obtain at least one interview with either a resident or non-resident parent (and a child where possible) from five families in each area – four in the community sample and one high conflict case. Ideally we should have liked to have ‘full sets’ of three interviews in all forty families, but experience in interviewing family groups led us to believe that this would not be possible. It was envisaged that between 10 and 15 family sets might be obtained and the remainder of the sample would consist of interviews with individual – either resident or non-resident – parents, and in some cases their child, too. We hoped to obtain a minimum of 76 interviews in total.

Although the final sample did include 10 family sets, it contained only 51 individual interviews. A series of problems was encountered from the beginning of the study which prevented the overall sample size being reached. These are outlined briefly below.

Many of the local recruiters experienced difficulties in finding families agreeable to being contacted by the researchers. At the request of the recruitment agency, some new areas were selected (using the same method as previously). This led to a few more families agreeing to be contacted, but not the required number. By this time the agency was experiencing difficulties in finding recruiters willing to take on the task.

Contact was made with numerous organisations which worked with separated families. These included community-based mediation services and fathers’ groups and organisations. All expressed a willingness to help with the research but few were able to identify any parents who were agreeable to being interviewed.

The high conflict cases involved the help of Cafcass. The required application to carry out research with their staff and clients became lost in the system and nine months elapsed before permission was given to approach Cafcass staff in the selected areas.

The initial interviews with Cafcass managers to explain the research and obtain their agreement to participate took up to three months to arrange. In some cases it was necessary to attend a subsequent group meeting with staff to explain the research, and this added further to the delay.

Although Cafcass managers were agreeable in principle to helping identify cases, their staff – on whom this task fell – were frequently not. This was typically, and understandably, because their workload was already so great that they had little time to identify suitable cases and contact former clients on our behalf. However, in one area, there was a blanket refusal by staff to help with the research as it did not, in their opinion, pay due regard to domestic violence, which was a major issue among their service users.
Finally, as is always the case with research on sensitive issues, several potential respondents, after initially agreeing to an interview changed their mind and decided against participation. When individuals had to cancel interview appointments because of other, more pressing matters, these were re-arranged.

**Data collection methods**

Data collection from the families was by means of qualitative in-depth interviews carried out separately with parents and with at least one of their children aged between seven and sixteen. The interviews were carried out in respondents’ homes and lasted approximately one and a half hours for adults and between 30 and 40 minutes with children and young people. Topic guides were used, adapted for use with the different sub-groups (i.e. children, resident parents, non-resident parents), but covering the same general areas in each sub-group so that the data could be ‘triangulated’ within families and compared across sub-groups.

The topic guides for children were adapted to be age-appropriate, and for younger children included projective techniques and visual aids, such as prompt cards to help develop questions on more abstract topics which they might have found difficult to talk about. Specially commissioned cartoons were used to depict a range of emotions from happy to sad and a range of behaviours from good to naughty.

To reassure parents about younger children’s safety, we interviewed parents first and gave them prior sight of the topic guide and any materials for use with children. Children chose whether they wished to be interviewed alone or with a parent present.

Anonymity and complete confidentiality was guaranteed to families involved in the research, and it was stressed that information provided by one member of the family would not be passed to the other. To reassure parents on this point, no researcher interviewed both the resident and non-resident parent in a family. Wherever possible, a male researcher interviewed fathers and a female interviewed mothers. The resident parent and child chose whether a male or female talked to the children.

All interviews were audio-taped with the respondent's permission, and transcribed in full and verbatim prior to a thematic analysis.

**1.3.3. Study of services**

In each of the eight selected areas, qualitative telephone interviews were carried out with a member of staff in the key statutory services which appear to impact most significantly on non-resident parents, i.e: housing, social services and education. Although we wished, ideally, to speak to the relevant senior managers or heads of commissioning in each service, this was not always possible and in many cases interviews were conducted with another (though no less knowledgeable) member of staff. In total 19 interviews were conducted: in some departments in certain areas, staff had insufficient time for an interview.

Interviews lasted around one hour and, using a semi-structured questionnaire, explored the extent to which these services were able to address the needs of non-resident parents and what changes, if any, they thought could be made to serve this group of users better.
2. REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

This review addresses the current state of knowledge about the effects on children of having a non-resident parent and the way in which policy and practice facilitate or create barriers to their maintaining an effective relationship. Literature reviews exploring outcomes for children in separated families (most recently Dunn, 2004) touch only peripherally on service provision to non-resident parents and their children, and most do not consider how low-income families in particular might be affected by the presence, absence or nature of services. Similarly, reviews on fathers and fatherhood only mention non-resident parents in passing, if at all (Featherstone, 2003).

The review examines:

- Current policy and the socio-legal context in relation to non-resident parents in England and Wales
- Contact between non-resident fathers and their children
- Barriers to contact
- Services and programmes in the UK that have been developed to address the needs of non-resident parents and their children
- Services and programmes in other countries that have been developed to address the needs of non-resident parents and their children.

It concludes by drawing together the main issues and recommendations which stem from the existing literature and which inform the subsequent empirical part of this study.

2.1. Definitions and the UK context

Non-resident parents are those who do not live in the same household as their child(ren) and who are divorced or separated from, or have never cohabited with, the child’s other parent. According to the 2001 Census, 2,672,000 dependent children (one in four of all children under 16, or aged under 19 if in full-time education) lived in a lone-parent family and more than one in ten dependent children lived in a step-family (ONS, 2001). Some of these children will have lived with both their parents for a period of time, though some will never have done so. Kiernan (2005), using data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)\(^1\), estimated that 60% of babies are born to married couples, 25% to cohabiting couples and 15% to parents not registered as living together.

Historically and culturally in the UK, in circumstances where the parents do not live together children have typically remained in the day-to-day care of their mother. Consequently, over 90% of lone-parent families are headed by a mother and over 80% of step-families consist of a natural mother and a step-father (ONS, 2006). Accordingly, non-resident parents are predominantly fathers, although there are no official records of their number in the UK. While little research currently exists concerning non-resident mothers (who are comparatively few in number) a body of knowledge is starting to emerge that focuses on specific challenges and issues faced by this group of parents.

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\(^1\) The MCS collected baseline data in 2001-02 from over 18,000 families at the time that their child was nine months old.
(Stewart, 1999; Kiely, 2005; Hart, 2008). Non-resident mothers have been described as a ‘hidden population’, due to perceived social stigma attached to the circumstance and the resultant reluctance of many to highlight their position. Nevertheless, given that this group still makes up a relatively small proportion of the whole, this review focuses predominantly on non-resident fathers.

2.2. The legal framework in England and Wales

Linked to the definition of non-resident parents are definitions of parental responsibility. The Children Act (1989) marked a shift from parental rights to parental responsibility, which was defined as:

“All the rights, duties, powers, responsibility and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his or her property. Children Act, 1989 Introduction 3.1”

Each parent is entitled to make decisions about the child independently of the other. Both parents have the right to assume authority of their child if it is in the child’s best interest, to ensure their physical, moral and emotional well-being.

2.2.1. The Children Act (1989)

- The Children Act 1989 is based on the belief that children are generally best looked after within the family, with both parents playing a full part and without resort to legal proceedings. The welfare of the child is the paramount consideration.

- Courts will not make orders regarding children unless the parents are in fundamental disagreement about where they should live, what sort of contact they should maintain etc., or there are concerns about their welfare. Parents are encouraged to seek agreement between themselves wherever possible.

- Children should always be consulted (subject to age and understanding) and kept informed about what will happen to them. Court decisions about their future upbringing should be responsive to their needs. Parents and the children’s wider family circle (grandparents and other relations) should continue to have a role to play in the lives of the children even when they are living apart from them. This contact should be safeguarded by each parent.

- Children’s issues must be determined as soon as possible so that minimum disruption is caused to the child’s life. To minimise delay, the court must draw up a timetable at a preliminary hearing in respect of subsequent proceedings. The court must have regard to a prescribed Statutory Checklist of the factors to be taken into account in deciding the future of children.

This key piece of legislation has been supplemented in parts by other, more specific laws. Most notable is the Children and Adoption Act, 2006, introduced by the Department for Schools and Education (DfES, now the Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF]). This is the implementation of the Green Paper Parental Separation: Children’s Needs and Parents’ Responsibilities. The Act focuses on matters of parental responsibility, and on reforming legal and institutional arrangements when parents separate. It seeks to give courts a wider range of powers to develop and enforce contact arrangements, increase information available to parents concerning relationship breakdown, produce parenting plans; give guidance about parental arrangements after
separation;, develop an in-court conciliation system for cases that go to court, and generally work with parents to produce better outcomes for children. The Act also looks at those parents who are unlikely to make use of early childhood services, compelling local authorities to put in place strategies for their identification and engagement.

Other relevant pieces of legislation come from the field of international law. Both The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and The European Convention on Human Rights (incorporated to a large extent into UK law through the Human Rights Act 1998) contain articles pertinent to the legal rights and responsibilities of parents and children.

2.2.2. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 9 of the UNCRC outlines states’ responsibilities to ensure that children are not unnecessarily separated from their parents, to give both parents the opportunity to take part in legal proceedings involving their children, and, most importantly:

*States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child’s best interests.*

2.2.3. European Convention on Human Rights

There is a certain amount of tension between the European Convention on Human Rights and domestic family law in the UK. The ECHR is underpinned by a ‘parent-centered jurisprudence’ that focuses on the rights of the parents to have contact with their children whereas British law is based on the principle of child welfare, where contact is promoted only when in the child’s interests. The Children Act 1989 deliberately fell short of introducing a legal presumption of contact on behalf of the parent, instead insisting that parents ‘owe’ children contact in so far as it allows them to fulfill their responsibilities, in this sense placing parental rights as secondary to their responsibilities. Cases brought to the European Court of Human Rights are normally contested under Article 8 of the ECHR, arguing that the prevention of contact with one’s child constitutes a contradiction of the principle that ‘Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life…’ Since the incorporation of the convention into UK law in 1998 there has been a trend in relevant cases for parents to argue for their ‘rights’ to contact with the child in the ‘old fashioned sense’, not necessarily citing the child’s interests. (Boyle et al, 2002)

2.2.4. The legal position of previously married fathers

The legal position of a non-resident father with regards to shared parental responsibility is dependent upon whether he was married to the mother, or, from the 1st December 2003, was registered jointly with the mother on the child’s birth certificate. Having previously been married to the mother of their child affords a divorced father an automatic and legal right to shared parental responsibility.

Arrangements for contact between the non-resident parent and his children are typically worked out privately between divorced couples. There is no statutory obligation to apply to the courts if private arrangements can be worked out amicably and, following the reform of the divorce law (Family Law Act 1986), parents are actively encouraged to
reach agreement without recourse to the law. Where this is not the case, parents can apply for a court order, whereby a judge will independently assess and issue contact privileges to parents (Hunt and Roberts, 2004). A court will only make an order if it feels it is in the best interests of the child to do so. The main orders that may be made by a court are:

- a residence order to determine who the child should live with
- a contact order to determine who the child should have contact with and what form that contact should take.

This position is supplemented by the ECHR in Article 5, *Equality between spouses*, which states that:

*Spouses shall enjoy equality of rights and responsibilities of a private law character between them, and in their relations with their children, as to marriage, during marriage and in the event of its dissolution. This Article shall not prevent States from taking such measures as are necessary in the interests of the children.*

### 2.2.5. The legal position of previously unmarried fathers

Following separation, a father who has never been married to the mother of the child is in a much weaker legal position than a previously married father. An unmarried father is not necessarily assumed by law to be the biological father and is not automatically entitled to share parental responsibility (Dyer, 2005).

Before December 2003, if the father and mother were not married at the time of the birth of a child, the father did not have shared parental responsibility unless one of the following applied:

- he and the mother made a formal shared parental responsibility agreement
- he had a court order granting him parental responsibility
- he was appointed as guardian
- he and the child's mother married.

However, following a change in law in December 2003, fathers have shared parental responsibility if they register the birth jointly with the mother. Prior to this date, joint registration did not grant legal rights to the father, although the majority of births to cohabiting couples were jointly registered. Statistics produced by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) show that around 7% of births each year are solely registered by mothers, meaning that each year around 45,000 children do not have their father’s name on their birth certificate (DWP and DCSF, 2008). Kiernan (2005) found that in 2001-02 this proportion rose to 37% in cases where the parents were not living at the same address when the child was born.

In further steps, the DWP launched a consultation on introducing the compulsory joint registration of births as a measure both to involve fathers and remind them of their responsibility. This process led to the June 2008 release of a departmental White Paper, *Joint birth registration: recording responsibility* (DWP and DCSF, 2008). This document focuses on the birth registration process for unmarried parents. At its heart is the right of the child to know who both his/her parents are, but, coupled with the 2003 change in
legislation it should remove some of the legal problems faced previously by unmarried fathers on separation.

Until recently it was not uncommon for unmarried fathers to have had the misperception that, if they had lived with the mother for a certain amount of time, following separation they would be treated similarly to married couples in terms of property and children (Dyer, 2005). Smart and Stevens (2000) found from their interviews with 40 cohabiting parents that few understood their legal situation. Fathers were surprised to learn that they had no automatic entitlement to shared parental authority during cohabitation or on separation. In an earlier survey of a random sample of more than 200 fathers, Pickford (1999) found similar results: few non-married fathers realised they had no legal say in important decisions such as the upbringing of their children including naming, medical treatment and religion. The survey found no difference between married and cohabiting fathers in their attitudes towards parenthood and their commitment to their children. Pickford (1999) argued that there was an urgent need for clear information about the law to be given to parents at appropriate places such as antenatal clinics and registry offices.

The Law Commission conducted a review in 2007, which led to new legal rights for cohabitees when their relationship ends. However, this did not focus on the ‘parental responsibility’ issue but rather on the financial aspects of separation. The review does not encompass giving cohabitees the same rights as those of married parents, but focuses on providing a safety net when their relationship ends in separation or death. Legally, marriage continues to be the foundation of secure legal rights for fathers. However, Smart and Stevens (2000) suggest that encouragement of marriage would do little to promote stability in relationships and that emphasis on this may overlook the welfare of children.

The UNCRC also makes pronouncements relevant to the legal position of unmarried fathers. In Article 18 it states that ‘States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child.’ This article foreshadows the above developments in the joint birth registration and parental responsibility by promoting parental responsibility independent of marital status. This clause is then supplemented by the statement that ‘States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.’ (UNCRC article 18.1/18.2). This is particularly relevant to the obligations of states to support non-resident parents in their role as parents.

2.2.6. Financial support of children by non-resident parents

Parents have joint financial responsibility for a child, even if they do not live together and the non-resident parent has no contact with the child. Courts do not decide on the imposition or level of child support payments. Where necessary, this has been the responsibility of the Child Support Agency (CSA), which came into being through the Child Support Act (1991), in response to the mounting costs incurred by successive governments since the 1970s in supporting the growing numbers of lone mothers and children.
For the CSA to become involved in a case, their services had to be requested by one of the parents or, in Scotland, a child over the age of 12. However, the CSA became involved automatically when the person with care was in receipt of state welfare benefits. The CSA could not become involved if a written agreement made prior to April 5th 1993 was in place, if a court order regarding child support had been made, or, with certain exceptions, if the non-resident parent lived abroad.

The principles on which the CSA was founded and the manner of its operation gave rise to perceptions of injustice among many parents, with non-resident fathers especially vociferous in their criticisms. It was seen as an agency which targeted the ‘easy’ cases, allowing recalcitrant fathers to avoid supporting their children, while those who co-operated saw limited financial benefit to their children if the mother was receiving Income Support. Lewis (2002) argued that the workings of the CSA led to fatherhood becoming increasingly synonymous with provision of financial support at the cost of other forms of parental caring.

The recognised shortcomings of the agency led the DWP to publish *A new system of child maintenance* (December 2006), a White Paper outlining substantial changes to the child support system in the UK, and more recently the 2008 Green Paper *No-one written off*. These documents outline a string of new measures, including the replacement of the CSA with C-MEC (Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission) which focuses on recovering money from non-resident parents who refuse to pay child support.

Changes made included ending a rule that forces parents on benefits to use the CSA even if they have voluntary arrangements in place, providing guidance to parents on making voluntary arrangements, and enforcing the joint registration of births. Significantly, in 2010 parents on income-related benefits will be allowed to keep all the child financial support they receive from the non-resident parent. In the interim, the £10 limit which applied previously will be doubled to £20. This is seen as an attempt to simplify the system, encourage non-resident parents to honour their obligation to pay, and to address the issue of child poverty.

### 2.2.7. Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass)

Established in 2001, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) is a national non-departmental public body. Its functions, set out in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000, relate to family proceedings where the welfare of a child is or may be in question. Specifically, these are to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child, give advice to the court about any application made to it in such proceedings, make provision for children to be represented in such proceedings, and provide information, advice and support for children and their families.

Cafcass deals with cases in both public law, where children may be placed in the care of a local authority or adopted, and private law, where parents are separating or divorcing and have been unable to reach agreement on arrangements for their children. Their role is normally far more substantial in public law cases, where they will appoint a guardian to represent the child in court proceedings, than in private law, where their task is largely restricted to compiling a Section 7 Report – an appraisal of all matters relevant to the welfare of the child.
2.3. The policy context

Fatherhood is an area that has received increasing attention from policy makers since the 1970s. Policy relevant to the situation of non-resident fathers is contained in two main documents, Supporting Families (1998) and Every Child Matters (2003). Several policy documents that focus on particular aspects of the child-parent relationship are also discussed in this section.

2.3.1. Supporting Families (1998)

The Green Paper, Supporting Families (1998) stressed the need for wider kin networks, improved advice and information to families and a better balance between the demands of home and work. It set out the conditions and services to meet the needs of modern families such as tax credits and family-friendly policies which allowed for a better balance between work and family life.

2.3.2. Every Child Matters (2003) and the Children Act (2004)

The Green Paper, Every Child Matters (ECM), was published in 2003, alongside the formal response to the report into the death of Victoria Climbié. ECM focuses on five outcomes for children: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and achieving economic well-being. The Green Paper built on existing plans to strengthen preventative services by concentrating on four key themes:

- Increasing the focus on supporting families and carers - the most critical influence on children's lives
- Ensuring necessary intervention takes place before children reach crisis point and protecting children from falling through the net
- Addressing the underlying problems identified in the report into the death of Victoria Climbié - weak accountability and poor integration
- Ensuring that the people working with children are valued, rewarded and trained.

Following the consultation period, the Government published Every Child Matters: Next Steps, and passed the Children Act 2004 which provided the legislation for developing more effective and accessible services focused around the needs of children, young people and families. The Children Act 2004 established for England:

- a Children’s Commissioner to champion the views and interests of children and young people
- a requirement on Local Authorities to appoint a Director of Children’s Services and designate a Lead Member
- a duty on Local Authorities to make arrangements to promote co-operation between agencies and other appropriate bodies and a duty on key partners to take part in the co-operation arrangements
- a duty on key agencies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children
- a duty on Local Authorities to set up Local Safeguarding Children Boards and on key partners to take part
- provision for indexes or databases containing basic information about children and young people to enable better sharing of information
• a requirement for a single Children and Young People’s Plan to be drawn up by each Local Authority
• the creation of an integrated inspection framework and the conduct of Joint Area Reviews to assess local areas’ progress in improving outcomes
• provisions relating to foster care, private fostering and the education of children in care.

*Every Child Matters: Change for Children*, published in November 2004, at the same time as the Children Act was passed, sets out the national framework for local programmes to build services around the needs of children and young people to improve outcomes for them.

### 2.3.3. Other relevant policy

The Lord Chancellor’s Department (2003) had previously made the assertion that the British Government’s declared aim was to enable children to benefit from the stability of contact with two parents. The Department made increasing safe and secure contact one of its Public Service Agreement Targets. A baseline survey of contact patterns was commissioned and a Programme Board with interested stakeholders established to deliver objectives. However, this ended in 2003 and it appears that similar targets have not been set by the new Department for Constitutional Affairs or passed over to the Department for Education and Skills.

Key developments in public policy have arisen from two reports following on from consultation exercises conducted by the Children Act subcommittee of the Family Law Advisory Board, looking at contact and domestic violence, and by the Advisory Board on Family Law, focusing on the facilitation of contact and the enforcement of contact orders. In July 2004, the President of the Family Division issued the Private Law Framework, which is intended to assist parents in safeguarding their children’s welfare after parental separation or relationship breakdown.

### 2.3.4. Every Parent Matters

*Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007) focuses primarily on the issues of parental involvement in early child development and education. It suggests that ‘Government needs to consider carefully its role in enabling all parents to play a full and positive part in their children’s learning and development.’ (p2). This policy development hinges on a growing recognition of the importance of both parents in children’s social and emotional development, and educational attainment, in particular the value of involving the father. The paper acknowledges that there are numerous barriers to fathers’ involvement, suggesting that often services are insensitive to fathers’ needs and fail to connect with the context of fathers’ lives or motivations. Consequently it states that:

> *Irrespective of the degree of involvement they have in the care of their children, fathers should be offered routinely the support and opportunities they need to play their parental role effectively.* (p10)

The document goes on to delineate numerous measures that the government is to take to support and encourage parents in taking an active role in their children’s development and education. These include, for parents of young children, parenting programs, subsidising books for families, extending early education centres, and funding new outreach workers to engage with less easily engaged groups.
For parents of school-age children, the paper pledges to increase advice services, increase the number of schools that offer extended services (aiming for all schools to do so by 2010), roll out nationally programs that focus on social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL), pilot several schemes to increase parental involvement, and also increase the power of local authorities and schools to hold parents to account if they will not act to improve the behaviour or attendance of their children.

While this paper flags, on several occasions, the need for greater support for non-resident parents, there are no policies aimed directly at this group. There is, however, an increased importance placed on engaging fathers, most notably in the section about Sure Start Children’s Centres. This calls for ‘all staff in services … to engage proactively with fathers’. Emphasis is put on making fathers feel comfortable and confident in accessing the services. Hence the paper advises Sure Start to develop more comprehensive strategies for both recruiting men onto their staff and actively seeking out fathers’ involvement, with a view to developing some ‘services which are designed specifically for men’.

2.3.5. The wider policy context

The above policy and legislation should be understood in the context of a wider redefinition of the state’s relationship with fathers. Over recent years a large number of policy papers have emerged that affirm the government’s commitment to supporting both parents in having meaningful relationships with their children. The Framework for Assessment for Children in Need and Families, produced by the Department of Health (DH) in 2000, states that ‘The parenting tasks undertaken by fathers or father figures should be addressed alongside those of mothers or mother figures.’ (p20).

The National Service Framework for Children, Young People, and Maternity Services (2004), produced in tandem by the DfES and the DH, acknowledges that the role of fathers in parenting their children is frequently overlooked. In outlining their “Core Standards” the document states that the ‘National Service framework supports a cultural shift in all service provision, to include fathers in all aspects of a child's well-being.’ (p69-70). It proposes universal, targeted and specialist services to ensure that both parents receive appropriate support when needed. In the Primary Care section of the document the authors acknowledge that ‘In addition to providing support and advice for women, [health practitioners should] seek to engage and support fathers, where appropriate’ (p42). Such engagement and support, this document argues, should begin as early as possible in the child’s life, starting with pregnancy and birth.

Involvement of prospective and new fathers in a child's life is extremely important for maximising the life-long well-being and outcomes of the child (regardless of whether the father is resident or not). Pregnancy and birth are the first major opportunities to engage fathers in the appropriate care and upbringing of their children. (Chapter 11, 5.2)

Policy relating the UK’s children centres also demonstrates a growing recognition of the importance of father involvement. Papers released in 2003, 2005, 2006 by the DfES, and from the DCFS in 2007, all spell out the ways in which children’s centres should seek to involve and support fathers. Children’s Centre Practice Guidance (DfES, 2005) contains a section entitled Working with fathers. This chapter starts with reference to research about the benefits of father involvement with their children and then moves on
to recognise the potential pitfalls in this engagement and the historic failures to involve
both parents sufficiently: ‘Practitioners admitted that they often knew little about fathers,
did not see them as central to their task, and lacked the skills to engage with them.’
(p53). This paper identifies areas in which fathers may need support, which include:
promoting confidence in their parenting skills; helping them develop more competence in
parenting; supporting them in maintaining a cooperative relationship with the mother of
their child; and providing support at times of great stress, such as separation from the
mother. One observation made in this paper that is echoed in much of the literature is
that:

_Fathers generally appreciate some services which are designed specifically for
men …… Many fathers do not feel they are expert parents and an all male
environment can enable them to feel more confident about interacting with their
child and seeking advice._ (p54)

Subsequent policy papers develop this theme and make further suggestions of how to
engage with fathers. The Children’s Plan; Building Brighter Futures, produced by the
DCSF in late 2007, acknowledges the need ‘to improve how government and services
involve fathers.’ (p6) This, they suggest, might involve offering services that fit in with
their working patterns or providing help in a form that is appropriate, here making
reference to research showing that ‘63 per cent of fathers say that their preferred
channel for information and support is the internet.’ (p23). In the 2008 paper, The Child
Health Promotion Programme (CHPP), the Department of Health outlines several
strategies for engaging fathers in their programme. These include (p24):

- From the beginning, promote the father’s role as being important to his child’s
  outcomes
- Make it explicit that the CHPP is there for the whole family
- Arrange meetings, services, groups and reviews to maximise the possibility of
  fathers attending
- Include positive images of fathers from different ethnic groups and of different
  ages in the literature that you produce and display
- Record fathers’ details – including those of non-resident fathers.
- Include an assessment of the father’s needs as well as the mother’s, as these will
  have a direct impact on both the mother and the child.
- Include an assessment of the father’s health behaviours (e.g. in relation to diet,
  smoking, and alcohol or drug use)
- Signpost fathers to all of the relevant services.

Offer antenatal preparation to fathers, including at times that will be convenient for
working fathers (e.g. evenings).

2.4. **Contact between non-resident parents and their children**

Hunt and Roberts (2004) argue that it is difficult to assess how much contact is occurring
between children and non-resident parents in the UK as estimates vary depending on
the type of study, what is being measured, and which parent is asked. For example in
the 2003 review by the Department of Constitutional Affairs, 14% of non-resident parents
reported never having direct contact with their children following relationship breakdown, whereas when the same question was posed to resident parents the figure rose to 27% (Bollington, 2002). ‘Overall, non-resident parents tended to report more frequent contact, and more overnight contact, than resident parents.’ (Hunt and Peachey, 2008).

Despite these inconsistencies in reporting, aggregating the data gives a general picture of the levels of contact that children have with their non-resident parents. In their overview of the literature, Hunt and Peachey (2008) suggest that the available evidence points to around 30% children losing contact altogether. The authors go on to state that:

… between 9 per cent and 17 per cent of parents shared the care of the child equally, or nearly equally, with the other parent. Sixty-five per cent of nonresident parents said there is overnight contact. Forty-four per cent of resident parents said their child either splits their time equally, or sees their other parent at least weekly. (p18)

Of the entire number of parents that separate, only around 10% seek a court hearing to resolve contact issues, and only a small proportion of these cases go to a final contested hearing, with many parents reaching a resolution beforehand or with the non-resident parent removing their original application for contact.

2.4.1. Evidence on outcomes for children

There is broad consensus among researchers that children who grow up living without one of their parents, on average, fare less well in terms of numerous outcomes than children who grow up with both their parents. Amato (2005) outlines these factors as the following:

Academic success (school grades, scores on standardized achievement tests), conduct (behavior problems, aggression), psychological well-being (depression, distress symptoms), self-esteem (positive feelings about oneself, perceptions of self-efficacy), and peer relations (number of close friends, social support from peers). Moreover, children in divorced families tend to have weaker emotional bonds with mothers and fathers than do their peers in two-parent families. (p77)

Early studies showed that boys had worse outcomes than girls as a result of parental separation (Hetherington, 1979, and Hetherington et al, 1982) and this was explained by the gender asymmetry of resident/non-resident parents. However, recent studies have not wholly confirmed these findings (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998), suggesting that it is predominantly in the field of social adjustment that boys fare worse than girls (Amato, 2005). Reasons for the results in early studies are not clear but the gender dimension of outcomes is now understood to be much less pronounced than previously thought. One possible explanation is the tendency for boys’ reactions to parental separation to manifest themselves in a more obvious way, through poor behaviour, while for girls parental separation is more likely to result in internalizing behaviours such as guilt or depression (Macintosh, 2003).

While the extent and quality of contact with the non-resident parent is considered to impact on children’s well-being and future prospects, it is by no means the only factor that affects them. One of the key determinants of outcomes is thought to be the financial situation of the family. On average, single parent families have significantly lower
incomes than families headed by a couple and, consequently, are less able to provide resources for their children. McLanahan’s and Sandefur’s 1994 study showed that about ‘half of the differences in outcomes can be attributed to differences in economic circumstances’ (cited in Argys et al, 2003, p2). The diminished quality of parenting provided by the resident parent as a result of time and financial pressures is another key variable. Moreover, children in single parent families are more likely to be exposed to stress resulting from ill-feeling between parents. Furthermore, evidence showing the benefits of non-resident parents’ involvement can disguise the influence that the mother’s level of involvement in contact has on outcomes. (Bronstein et al, 1994; Hunt and Roberts, 2004).

Children who have experienced the death of a parent score higher on various well-being indicators than children who have experience parental divorce. This might suggest that it is the ongoing conflict and disappointment of a failed relationship rather than the absence of contact that is most harmful. (Amato, 2005)

Nevertheless, some findings have emerged that can inform policy and practice, particularly concerning the amount and type of contact non-resident parents have with their children and the need for a co-operative or at least not acrimonious relationship with their former partner (Amato, 1993; Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). Studies conducted by the Lord Chancellor’s Department between 2001 and 2003 explored the common factors of parents who had successful contact arrangements. It was found that these parents

- can maintain good communication between themselves
- are able to talk about issues concerning their children without arguing
- are willing to compromise over and accept differences between themselves in order to promote the best interests of their children
- put the needs of their children first, even when this means they have to make personal sacrifices
- are prepared to be flexible and consistent
- can negotiate about contact arrangements
- Encourage their children to maintain a good relationship with the other parent. (Walker et al, 2004)

According to the strength and interplay of these factors, outcomes for the child such as educational attainment, emotional and psychological well-being, and success in future adult relationships can be affected (e.g. Cabrera, 2000; Welsh et al, 2004; Flouri and Buchanan, 2006).

### 2.4.2. Educational attainment

Research has found that good father-child relationships are generally related to greater academic motivation and educational attainment (Flouri and Buchanan, 2006). This can be true for both resident and non-resident fathers depending on their level of involvement with their child – an ‘involved’ father was defined as a father who reads to his child, takes him/her on outings, is interested in his/her education and has a role equal to that of the mother (Flouri and Buchanan, 2006).

This view is acknowledged in recent policy developments such as in Every Parent Matters agenda which states that ‘Educational failure is increased by lack of parental
interest in schooling. In particular, a father’s interest in a child’s schooling is strongly linked to educational outcomes for the child.’ (DfES, 2007).

The analysis by Nord et al (1997) would appear to support the above. Utilising a national household education survey distributed in America in 1996, they obtained information from parents on 16,190 children and the involvement of their fathers in four particular school activities: school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, school or class events and volunteering for school activities. The research found that for children in grades 6 to 12 (ages 11-18), the involvement of their non-resident father increased the likelihood of their achieving mostly ‘A’ grades and enjoying school. However, this was in part attributable to the mothers’ level of involvement in their children’s schooling. That is, the more involved the mothers were, the more involved the non-resident fathers, so the child was benefiting doubly and the effect on the children’s education could not be purely attributed to the father. Stronger associations were found between the involvement of non-resident fathers in their children’s school and a reduction in the likelihood that the children had to repeat a grade, or had been suspended or expelled from school. These associations remained even after controlling for mothers’ involvement in school and other potentially confounding factors, including household income (usually, the higher the household income, the better the child’s adjustment following parental separation or divorce). The research findings in this respect highlight the importance of not just contact per se but active participation by the non-resident parent in their children’s lives, for example, through involvement with school. Caution is needed in extrapolating from these findings as the research relied on the resident parent’s report of the involvement of the non-resident parent.

The findings of Nord et al (1997) support those from previous research by Bronstein et al (1994) with 136 American school children in grades 9-12 (ages 14-18). They found that more frequent contact and greater involvement in different areas of the child’s life by the non-resident father was associated with better academic performance of children, and particularly boys, living in single-mother families. Similar results were found for boys living in step-families but maintaining high levels of contact with their biological father. These boys had a positive self-concept, fewer psychological problems and better classroom behaviour than those whose non-resident fathers had little involvement. Bronstein et al (1994) postulated that the positive outcomes of contact for boys might be due to the type of interaction that the father has with his son, for example focusing on instrumental tasks. A note of caution is needed when generalising these findings: the research sample was mostly white and much of the variation on child outcomes and occurrences of co-parenting in single parent families appeared to be related to the level of household income – that is, children living in higher income homes tended to have better adjustment outcomes following separation or divorce. This again indicates that children living in families with a low-income are likely to be more disadvantaged than peers living in better economic conditions following the breakdown of their parents’ relationship.

2.4.3. Financial support as a mediator of outcomes

Financial support provided by the father can make a difference to whether or not the child lives in poverty. In this way, fathers can have an indirect influence on their children due to the strong link between poverty and low academic achievement, psychological problems and crime and delinquency (Cabrera et al, 2000). Seltzer (1994) reviewing the consequences of marital dissolution for children, found that household income declines
by 37% when the father moves out. This equates to a 21% per capita reduction in income for the child. Of children with divorced lone parents, 47% experienced childhood poverty, whereas this figure is only 8% in intact two-parent families (LSE 1998).

In terms of the direct impact on outcomes for children in families where the non-resident father is paying child support, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found slightly ambiguous results. In their meta-analysis of 63 studies dealing with non-resident fathers and children’s well-being they found that a lack of contact did not necessarily affect child well-being as long the non-resident father continued to pay child support. Frequency of contact was also not seen to be an indicator of child well-being. This has led Amato and Gilbreth to conclude that beneficial outcomes may be related more to the type than the amount of contact between the non-resident father and his child. This relates to the need for non-resident parents to exercise ‘authoritative parenting’ discussed below.

2.4.4. The influence of the relationship between separated parents

The relationship between the non-resident father and his former partner has been shown to have a significant impact on child well-being. About one third of separations are characterized by a high level of acrimony and conflict. These levels usually lessen significantly after separation, though between 8% and 12% of parents remain entrenched and unable to reach compromise (Ayoub et al., 1999; King and Heard, 1999 cited in Macintosh 2003). Amato (1993), using an analysis of secondary data resulting from the national survey of families and households conducted in America in 1987-1988, found that for boys in families with little or no conflict between their parents, contact with their non-resident father was associated with a decrease in the number of behavioural problems - particularly at the highest level of contact. In families where some conflict existed, contact appeared to have few consequences for the boys' behaviour. However, in families with high parental conflict, contact with the non-resident father was associated with an increase in behavioural problems, which was particularly marked at the highest level of contact.

Amato’s (1993) findings for boys are consistent with the premise that frequent contact with non-resident fathers is beneficial, but only when it occurs within an environment of co-operation with the resident parent. Interestingly, there was no corresponding finding in the research for non-resident fathers and their daughters. The research concludes that maintaining or increasing contact with the non-resident parent is not always in a child's best interests. If both parents are to remain involved with their child then a positive (or at least not negative) relationship is needed with the former partner. If conflict is present between the parents then this adversely affects the adjustments outcomes of the child. Indeed, there is also a need to ensure that the contact between the non-resident father and the child is conflict-free as arguments between the non-resident father and the child were found to be associated with difficulties arising between the child and their mother, and, if applicable, with their step-father (Dunn et al., 2004).

The research by Welsh et al. (2004) supports the above to an extent, agreeing that children with a non-resident father are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems if there is a high level of conflict between their parents. However, they found that this impact was moderated by the mother’s level of involvement with the children – i.e., if the mother was highly involved with their child, a lack of involvement by the non-resident father had less impact. In this way, the non-resident father’s involvement did not always have a significant effect on the child’s well being. A note of
caution in interpreting the findings is struck by the authors, as difficulties in recruiting interviewees led to sub-samples of respondents being used for different aspects of the analyses.

Generally, the research literature appears, unsurprisingly, to support the hypothesis that co-operative parenting with shared responsibility for the health and well-being of the child and their care and discipline is the most beneficial for the child. One advantage of this form of parenting is that it can provide children with models of social interaction and conflict resolution on which they can model their own behaviour (Amato, 2004; Bronstein et al., 1994). The children are also subject to consistent standards of discipline.

Parents who cooperate in child rearing present a united authority structure. When parents agree on the rules for children and support one another's decisions, children learn that parental authority is not arbitrary. Parental agreement also means that children are not subjected to inconsistent discipline following instances of misbehaviour. Consistency between parents helps children to learn and internalise social norms and moral values. Also, a respect for hierarchical authority, first learned in the family, makes it easier for young people to adjust to social institutions that are hierarchically organised, such as schools and the workplace. (Amato, 2004 p.33)

While desirable, consistent and co-operative parenting may not always be achieved in practice. Amato (2004), in his review of parenting through family transitions, found that divorced fathers are less likely to engage in authoritative parenting and can be permissive and indulgent during contact times with their children, not setting rules or applying discipline. This may be due to their anxiety over the tenuous or fragile relationship that they may have with their children after separation from their former partner and the express desire to ensure that their children enjoy themselves during the contact time. This can be to the detriment of the child, as authoritative parenting practices provide a sense of security and trust and reinforce the child’s perceptions of competence and self-worth (Amato, 2004). Without authoritative parenting, the relationship can become more superficial, which can lead to long-term negative outcomes for the children. This again emphasises the importance of not just the amount of contact between non-resident parent and child but also the quality and type of interactions between them and, indeed, the importance of a co-operative relationship between parents. This could account for why some studies do not demonstrate a link between frequent contact and child well-being.

Amato (2004) and Bronstein et al. (1994) advocate the provision of mediation, programmes or interventions with a focus on improving children's relationships with both their parents and on support to enable effective co-parenting to occur. This, they believe, would help to improve the adjustment and well-being of children following divorce or separation. Research also indicates the need for more separation agreements involving joint physical or legal residence, which would facilitate joint parenting (Bauserman, 2000).

In their review of fatherhood in the twenty-first century, Cabrera et al. (2000) also found that financial support by the non-resident father benefits children most when there is harmony between the parents. This led them to conclude that responsibility for the well-being of children in separated families lies not only with the parents:
Whether men who are unable to provide for their families or who are in conflict with their spouses can effectively negotiate their roles as fathers will depend on how we (researchers, policymakers, practitioners) integrate our resources to institute policies and programmes that aim at helping families help themselves. (Cabrera et al, 2000 p.133)

2.4.5. Impact of non-resident parents on children’s later relationships

The constructive involvement of non-resident fathers would seem to act as an indicator for better emotional and psychological well-being in children. This measure appears to carry over in later life with father involvement acting as a protective factor for women against adult mental health problems but also increasing the likelihood of their engaging in satisfactory marital relationships (Cabrera et al, 2000; Flouri and Buchanan, 2003, 2006).

Women who as children experienced nurturing from and involvement with their fathers will develop different expectations about whom to marry and whether and how they and their partners will share the tasks of parenting. (Cabrera et al, 2000 p.133)

The nature of a child’s parental relationship has a significant impact on the form their future relationships may take. As a study into social exclusion illustrated, children who experienced their parents’ divorce tend to enter into multiple cohabitational relationships, and girls from separated families are at increased risk of becoming young mothers. (LSE, 1998).

2.4.6. Antisocial behaviour and contact with non-resident fathers

Where non-resident fathers are involved with their children, Carlson (2006) found that this relationship partially mediates negative outcomes on adolescent behaviour that might result from living in family structures other than a home with continuously married parents. Negative outcomes that were diminished included delinquency, and internalising and externalising behavioural problems. This reinforces the need for high quality paternal contact.

Supporting Carlson’s findings, Flouri and Buchanan (2002) found that early father involvement acts as a protective factor against children in separated families being in trouble with the police. This was particularly true for boys, with the finding persisting even after factors relating to adolescent delinquency were taken into account. Data for the study were taken from three sweeps of the National Child Development Study of 17,000 children born in March 1958 to assess father involvement when the child was aged seven. This means that the analysis is based on fathering practices as long ago as 1965. However, Pfiffner et al (2001) support these results in a later study completed in America. They found that father absence from the home and non-participation in their children’s lives was associated with antisocial personality traits in children. Interestingly, successful contact of non-resident fathers by the research team and their involvement in the research itself acted as a measure. It was found that anti-social behaviour characteristics in children were highest and socio-economic status lowest in those families where fathers could not be located or recruited to the study.
2.4.7. Children’s perspective

Two studies published in 2008 approached the question of outcomes from the viewpoint of children, exploring how the separation affected their sense of well-being and their aspirations for the future, who have they turned to for support and what have been the hardest obstacles to overcome.

A 2008 poll taken by One Poll for the Centre for Separated Families looked at the impact of parental separation on the happiness, hopes and well-being of children. This research polled one thousand children from different sorts of family configuration – married and living together, separated or divorced with a good or friendly relationship, and separated or divorced with a bad or unfriendly relationship – in order to determine the ways in which their outlooks diverged. The study found the children who said they were happiest were those living with both parents, who were almost two and a half times happier than children with separated or divorced parents who maintained a bad or unfriendly relationship. This same group, and those children whose separated parents were thought to have an amicable relationship, reported feeling closer to both their parents, more satisfied with school and more optimistic about their future prospects. Conversely just under 75% of children who came from separated families where the parents maintained unfriendly relations felt that their lives had been adversely affected, in terms of losing contact with family members and being caught up in parental arguments.

In her 2008 paper, Judith Dunn looked at family relationships with a focus on the perspective of the children. The study uses data collected as part of the extensive Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) and the more focused Avon Brothers and Sisters Study (ABSS). Dunn acknowledges the wealth of research that points to adverse outcomes for children from separated families but highlights the variance in outcomes between children who ostensibly face similar circumstances (i.e. children from the same family). Dunn argues that the study of family outcomes should be enlarged to include greater detail in the areas of: children’s perspectives of family life; the family history of parents; children’s relationships with family members other than their parents; and children’s relationships with friends. By addressing these complexities, Dunn suggests, a better understanding of the variation in outcomes will be reached.

Her research seeks to map out the familial and wider relationship geography to identify key protective and risk factors. While reiterating the differences she found both between and within families, her research suggests that key factors that promoted adjustment in children included: their relationship with their father, particularly when living just with their mother; the ability of their parents (and step-parents) to communicate effectively together and with the child; the quality of their relationship with their grandparents, especially immediately after separation, and especially with their maternal grandparents; and their closeness to their siblings and friends.

Failures or deficits in any of these areas were related to poor adjustment, as were adverse circumstances in the parents’ early lives, such the separation of their parents or teenage pregnancy. The study also highlighted children’s awareness, and concerns about, their family situations. A major cause of concern was parental conflict and tension, which were taken to demonstrate ‘the sensitivity of children to parental emotion and needs’ (p25). Other points of concern for children included feeling displaced by step-children or having a problematic relationship with a step-parent and torn loyalty and distress at having to act as a ‘go-between’ for parents. In adolescence these concerns
are even greater as increasing importance is attached to shared family activities and good communication with parents.

2.5. Barriers to contact: the needs of non-resident parents and their children

While much of the research evidence suggests that positive contact between the non-resident father and his child can have a beneficial impact on the child, maintaining contact may also be associated with reduced stress and decreased psychological difficulties for non-resident fathers. There can, however, be a number of barriers which prevent non-resident fathers engaging with their children.

Traditionally, the debate around lack of contact has focused on the unwillingness of the non-resident father to become involved, and this has led to the view of the so called ‘deadbeat dad’ (Peachy and Hunt, 2008). In their recent study, they reported that 31% of resident parents who said that they were unhappy with their contact arrangements indicated that this was due to too little contact by the non-resident parent, rather than too much. However, in recent years this view has been counterbalanced by the view that lack of contact is often the result of the resident parent’s unwillingness to allow contact, leading to the stereotype of the ‘obstructive mother’. As Peachy and Hunt argue, however:

*While both the ‘deadbeat dad’ and the ‘obstructive mother’ paradigms probably contain an element of truth, in most instances the reality is likely to be far more complex. What is very clear from research is that establishing and maintaining satisfactory contact arrangements can present major challenges to both resident and non-resident parents and to their children* (p7).

The literature identified several factors, resulting from the father’s own needs and external difficulties, which could create barriers to contact between non-resident fathers and their children. These fell broadly into three categories: financial and economic circumstances; relational and psychological needs; and lack of information, support and services. A further factor, often referenced by non-resident parents as an obstacle to contact with their children, is the court system.

2.5.1. Financial and economic circumstances

The non-resident father’s financial and economic circumstances can act as an inhibitor or facilitator to maintaining contact with his children. Koball and Principe (2002) found that fathers who were able to make financial contributions to their children were likely to see them more often and establish healthier relations with their children and former partners than those fathers who did not contribute. The link between the payment of child support and establishing co-operative relationships with former partners has been well researched (Cabrera *et al.*, 2000; Bronstein *et al.*, 1994). In cases of non-payment of formal child support, barriers may be raised by the mothers, or indeed by the fathers themselves, who may feel the payment of child support is a prerequisite to establishing and maintaining contact (U.S Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2000). Financial hardship can, therefore, damage the
possibility of a non-resident father maintaining regular and positive contact with his children in a co-operative parenting environment.

Supporting the above, Walker *et al* (1997) found that frequency of contact with children was related to father’s social class, employment status and income. Generally, the higher these factors, the more contact the non-resident father had with his children. Markedly, Walker *et al* found that 75% of unemployed non-resident fathers had little or no contact with their children, while overnight contact was most common for high income fathers. These results led the researchers to conclude that:

*The absence of an adequate income can have a profoundly negative impact on fathers, leading to an inability to pay maintenance or afford contact, treats and outings, as well as feelings of low self-worth and lack of self-esteem.* (Walker *et al*, 1997)

In terms of the ability and motivation to pay child support, Bradshaw *et al* (1998) found that 77% of non-resident fathers in their sample of 600 had paid child maintenance at some time, with 57% making payments at the time of the study. However, two-thirds of those fathers not paying maintenance provided informal support, including paying for children’s presents, clothes and shoes, holidays and outings. Contributions of this kind were seen by the father to benefit the child directly rather than being routed through the mother, as is the case for child support payments. Speak *et al* (1997), in their research with 40 young, non-resident fathers who had never lived with the mothers and came from disadvantaged backgrounds, found that several of the men provided childcare to enable the mothers take up paid employment or training or simply to give them some respite from childcare. This reinforces the need for parenting skills training to be available to non-resident fathers and the need for flexibility in working arrangements to enable shared childcare to occur.

Assessments for payment of child support made by the former CSA have caused much distress amongst non-resident fathers. Bradshaw *et al* (1998) found that 77% of non-resident fathers in their sample whose child support payment had been increased following their final assessment, thought that the increase was unfair and failed to take into account their living expenses, including housing costs and the costs associated with actually seeing their children. Sixty-one per cent thought that the assessment would have an impact on their current standard of living and just over half thought it would negatively affect their relationship with their former partner. A third of non-resident fathers said that the increased payments would lead to a decline in the informal payments that they gave their children. The relationship with the mother was an overriding factor in the payment of maintenance: fathers felt it was the mother, not the children, making the claim and that, therefore, the claim had to be legitimised through the mother’s active support of the non-resident father’s relationship with his child. If the mother contested or failed to accept the relationship, then the father might fail to see why he should pay maintenance when he did not receive what he wanted - contact with the child - in return. Bradshaw *et al* (1998) found that only 15% of non-resident fathers were neither paying formal maintenance nor providing informal support. Of these, it was judged that one third could probably afford to pay child support but 83% of such fathers saw their children less than once a year or not at all, creating some resistance to paying child maintenance. This reinforces the need to support fathers in their post-separation
relationships with their children and former partner and encourage them to acknowledge their responsibility to provide for their children.

Financial circumstances following a divorce or separation may impact on a poor non-resident father’s ability to support his children and maintain meaningful contact. After separation, benefits relating to dependent children can only be paid to one parent. This is usually to the resident parent, even if the child lives with the other parent half of the time or for significant periods. This may leave the non-resident parent at a significant financial disadvantage and unable to access benefits to support his children during the time spent together. O’Sullivan (2005) argues that recent welfare changes neglect non-resident fathers and that the Government continues to defend, as administratively effective, the discrimination inherent in the system.

Low-income non-resident fathers can face multiple barriers to supporting their children financially. Research in the USA found that they were more likely than more affluent non-resident fathers to have served a custodial sentence, be unemployed or facing unemployment and lack health insurance (Sorensen and Oliver, 2002). This can mean that it is difficult for them to engage in full-time, stable employment allowing them to contribute financially to their children’s upbringing. Demographically, non-resident fathers, particularly those that have never lived with the mother, are likely to be younger than resident fathers: in the research sample of Bradshaw et al (1998) research, 36% were under the age of 20. This highlights the impossibility of being able to earn a sufficient wage to support or contribute to two households.

Linked to issues of low income and economic disadvantage are those of housing and housing policy that can make it difficult for poor non-resident fathers to be involved with their children (Speak et al, 1997; Lewis et al, 2002; Wade and Smart, 2002). Social housing is allocated on the basis that ‘reasonable preference’ should be shown to certain groups given their greater need. These groups include the homeless, groups with medical problems, people in overcrowded or unacceptable housing, and key workers, but do not include non-resident parents.

Speak et al (1997), in their research with disadvantaged young fathers aged 16 to 24, found that housing and housing policy could make it more problematical for them to become independent of their own family, visit their children or have them to stay overnight. Young fathers still living with parents were keen to provide a second home for their children. However, single non-resident fathers are not a council housing priority and they may be placed in accommodation ill suited to caring for a child.

Furthermore, Lewis et al (2002) found that relocation may not be the solution if this leads to fathers being housed in a different neighbourhood from the children, leading to a loss of support networks and placing an additional strain on their financial ability to visit their child on a regular basis (Lewis et al, 2002).

Research points to the need to take a holistic view of family relations and their interaction with wider structural realities of employment, income and the child support systems (Welsh et al, 2004). Speak et al (1997) recommend that there should be a greater recognition of the opportunities that fatherhood offers for encouraging younger fathers into training, education and employment. They believe that the type of schemes offered in the USA, which encourage fathers into work and training for the sake of the children,
may be emulated in the U.K. This would require a more integrated inter-agency approach to policy making and delivery.

2.5.2. Relational and psychological needs

Many non-resident fathers face psychological and relational difficulties with children and former spouses during the separation process and after (Dudley, 1996; Bradshaw et al, 1998; Garfinkel et al, 1998; Sorensen and Turner, 1999; Baum, 2004; Wilson et al, 2004; Kalil et al, 2005). In many cases, the father is not only adjusting to reduced contact with their child but also managing the experience of relationship breakdown. Walker et al (1997) found that non-resident fathers recounted ‘a profound sense of loss’ regarding the decline of ‘normal’ contact with their children. This included the routine aspects of parenting such as bath-time, acting as a ‘chauffeur’ or just saying goodnight. Sorensen and Turner (1999) and Bradshaw et al (1998) found that this already charged emotional situation was exacerbated by feelings of lack of control both during the breakdown of the relationship (which many men felt was on the woman’s terms) and in the subsequent raising of their child. Research by Lewis et al (2002) with parents who had cohabited but subsequently separated supports this. The authors found that, after separation, the father’s role in childcare declined considerably even if they had previously been the primary carer of the child. Both parents depicted the mothers as being in control of the paternal contact.

Simpson et al (1995) in research on post-divorce parenting had delivered similar findings. Their research, again, highlighted the sense of loss that fathers can experience following separation and divorce, relating to loss of control, intimacy, routine and role. They found that fathers experienced divorce and post-divorce life as a series of transitions during which roles needed to be negotiated and renegotiated and oscillation occurred between many contrasting emotions including conflict and harmony with their former partner. Simpson et al advocate the better provision of support, advice and information including mediation, contact centres and self-help groups to aid non-resident fathers in the period following divorce. Meanwhile, Wilson et al (2004) argued that education and support services provided for and specifically targeted at separated non-resident fathers are vital. They suggest that such services should be proactive in reaching this specific population and should take into account a number of particular issues. These include non-resident fathers’ reasoning over disengagement, expectations and perceptions of services, and their understanding of conflict in family situations.

Whatever the circumstances causing the end of a relationship, there is a need for the non-resident father to maintain a certain civility with the mother in order to facilitate contact with their children. Bradshaw et al (1998) found that the father’s relationship with his former partner was a critical determinant in how much contact he had with his children; fathers with an amicable relationship with the mother had more regular contact than those where hostility existed. In their sample, just under half of non-resident fathers with child contact described their relationship with the mother as amicable. This can be compared with the 14% with no regular contact who described the relationship as amicable. Similarly, Walker et al (1997) found that 60% of fathers who rarely saw their children were in dispute with their former partner about the frequency of contact.

Walker et al (1997) found that fathers who had lost all contact with their children, estimated to be about 27% of the sample, had often exerted considerable effort to maintain positive relationships with their former partner and children. However, at some
time they had reached the point that the emotional, physical and financial costs of continuing contact weighed against the benefits, and they had made what they saw to be a sacrifice for the good of the children by no longer seeing them. These fathers were often bitter and resentful, particularly towards their former partner. Non-resident fathers who maintained contact with their children but avoided a relationship with the mother often did so in ‘a climate of mutual distrust’ and often appeared unhappy, experiencing ongoing problems in their personal lives long after divorce. This group accounted for just over a quarter of the non-resident fathers in their research. Fathers operating in a more communicative and co-operative environment with the mother of their children (about 46% of the sample), found that maintaining this relationship required hard work and renegotiation of their role. Their commitment to making it work had often been at the expense of forming a new relationship themselves (Walker et al, 1997).

While the mother plays a key gatekeeper role in granting access to children, other family members can also prove important. Speak et al (1997) found that grandparents could play a significant role in the development of the relationship between young non-resident fathers and their children. They found that this was particularly true of paternal grandparents who could provide practical, financial and moral support. Most, although not all, paternal grandparents welcomed the new child and in many cases the fathers indicated that it was their own mother who had instigated first contact between him and his child. However, when the young father was still living at home, the new member of the family could cause a strain on the family accommodation and budget.

A further significant factor in reduced or discontinued contact between non-resident parents and their children is the presence of a new partner of either parent. Hunt and Peachey (2008) demonstrate that there is a significant relationship between the presence of new partners and reduced contact.

2.5.3. Lack of information, support and services

Much of the research literature identifies a lack of guidance and support, both financial and non-financial for non-resident fathers (Speak et al, 1987; Sorensen and Turner, 1999; Wilson et al, 2004; King et al, 2004; McClean, 2004). While there is a range of interventions that cater for non-resident parents in the UK and USA, the vast majority offer services as part of a wider remit to support the whole family. Relatively few are tailored to and specifically focused on the needs of non-resident parents together with their children.

Non-resident fathers are considered to be one of the ‘hard to reach’ groups of service users (Quinton, 2004). Therefore, greater consideration needs to be given to strategies that will successfully engage and retain non-resident parents’ involvement in services. A publication by the US Department of Health and Human Services in 2000 details a number of recommendations for increasing non-resident fathers’ involvement in their children’s education, which can also be applied more generally to services for non-resident fathers. The recommendations include modifying practices to include non-resident fathers: for example, schools can send report cards to both parents to keep non-residential fathers engaged in their children’s education. Training and education are also seen as important to prepare staff to work with fathers, along with hiring more male outreach workers (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Other strategies include making fathers feel necessary, expecting them to participate in all
aspects of the lives of their children, strengthening their fathering skills and promoting co-operative parenting.

Family agencies and programmes have, in the past, been prone to ignore the significance of father participation altogether or to include fathers as auxiliary support for mother participants. Fathers tend not to participate in services involving young children, and, if they do attend, can face some hostility from the women present and feel unwelcome and ill-at-ease (Ghate et al., 2000; Yaxley et al., 2005). In the research by Speak et al. (1997), young men indicated that they had felt uncomfortable at the very much mother-centred parent-toddler groups they had attended. Services that do exist for fathers tend to attract older fathers. However, many fathers, particularly teenage and unmarried fathers, are uninformed about parenting, child development and custody rights and would benefit from these services (Speak et al., 1997).

Walker et al. (1997) found in their research that non-resident fathers were requesting help in finding their new role with their children. Many thought that the professionals that they had dealt with in the course of their separation such as mediators, welfare officers and lawyers assumed that there would be continuity in their role as fathers when in fact their role changed immensely.

Fathers made a plea for sound, comprehensive legal advice; more effective counselling and court welfare services; more access/contact centres; divorce information and education services; and recognition that non-residential parents have specific housing needs. (Walker et al., 1997)

Fathers also valued the opportunity to come together to form self-help groups to help navigate their new identity and relationship with their children.

A review of UK support services for children and parents experiencing family change set out recommendations on the issues which existing and future services for parents and children should address (Hawthorne et al., 2003). These recommendations incorporate a number that apply to services specifically for non-resident parents: provision of help for their own distress; support for and information about parenting; information about and opportunities to develop skills for managing conflict; and help in making arrangements for regular contact and involvement in their children’s lives. Braver et al. (2005) state that it is crucial to base service design on features of non-resident fathers’ experiences, as highlighted by research. They recommend that services should focus on encouraging as much father-child contact as possible and on upgrading the quality of non-resident fathers’ parenting and relationships with their children. Parenting skills should be focused specifically on the circumstances of non-residential parents. According to Braver et al., services should also aim to increase non-resident fathers’ desire to provide financial support voluntarily for their children and to improve the quality of post-divorce relations between fathers and their former partners.

2.5.4. The Family Court

One factor that features heavily in non-resident parents’ accounts of obstacles to contact with their children is involvement with the family court system. Only around 10% of separations involve the courts and of these an even smaller number go to a contested final hearing (Hunt and McLeod, 2008). Nevertheless, for this group of parents the outcome of the court case is the most significant influence on contact with their children.
The majority of private law cases involving children are either residence or contact applications, with around sixty percent of such cases being over residence. Mothers are more likely to apply for residence while fathers are more likely to apply for contact. The majority of both types of case are resolved within a year. However, contact cases are more likely to take longer, often as a consequence of high levels of animosity between the parents. (Smart *et al* 2005). While there is no legal requirement for courts to permit contact to both parents, they do, nevertheless, approach the issue with an intention to grant contact unless there are compelling reasons not to (LCD, 2002). According to Hunt and Macleod, (2008), it may be for this reason that serious welfare concerns were raised by four in five resident parents who opposed unsupervised contact.

As Smart *et al* (2005) argue in their follow-up study on court outcomes ‘issues of child welfare – although real – were not necessarily the driving force behind the conflict.’ They suggest that often there are many other motivating factors, including feelings of hostility resulting from the separation that are not deemed relevant by the courts and are thus sublimated under the heading of the ‘child’s welfare’. They go on to say that:

*Because the courts would not listen to these complaints, parents channelled their hostility into the one issue they could take before a judge, namely disputes over the children’s residence and the time they spent with the other parent.* (pi)

Smart *et al* identify what they call ‘The Parenting Contest’, which they argue is prevalent in residence and contact cases, as a result of underlying animosity, where ‘it becomes paramount to “prove” that the other parent is inadequate or unworthy’ (Smart *et al*, 2005). This kind of impasse can be deeply troubling for the parents and the children but can also result in contact being denied to one of the parents.

The court system faces a range of criticism both from resident and non-resident parents. Non-resident fathers often point to the view that the courts can be biased towards resident parents. Many parents complained that after the laborious court process they were handed a standard contact ruling (for example, alternate weekends and every Wednesday night): ‘Parents felt they had earned a more tailored order that would fit better with their children’s specific needs.’ (Smart *et al*, 2005).

Recent research seems to have dealt some traditional complaints a blow. In their 2008 study of court outcomes, Hunt and Macleod argue that in the majority of cases applications for contact are successful, both in gaining direct contact for the non-resident parent and of the type that they had applied for. Furthermore they argue that:

*There was no evidence that non resident parents as a group are systematically unreasonably treated by the family courts…. In a small minority of cases, however, it might be argued that the outcome was unfair to the non-resident parent.* (p2)

Similarly, in response to the view that courts promote conflict rather than cooperation, Smart *et al* (2003) present evidence that a common reason for going to court is a sense of insecurity about informal arrangements and a desire to have ‘clear boundaries imposed on the problem’. This, they argue, ‘runs counter to the general view that it is harmful for disputes to go to court because it can delay a resolution or because it increases hostility.’ (p2).
Throughout their research into court outcomes, Smart et al. (2005) collected suggestions that parents had expressed about how the court process could be improved. Both parents and researchers have been critical of the lack of support they are provided with after the final ruling. In instances where parents are denied contact altogether or contact orders are not adhered to by the other party, many parents felt that they were left to ‘make do’. This could result in anger or unhappiness and often led back to the courts ‘thus re-engaging with a cycle of hostility.’ (Smart et al., 2005).

Equally, Smart et al. identify a certain group of cases where the family falls between available provisions. Specifically, this group’s problems are not deemed sufficient to require public law (care) proceedings but they exceed the capabilities of the private law. The authors argue that ‘there is little in place to offer long-term support to these families if Social Services decline to become involved.’ (p3).

There are also growing concerns over the regulations governing eligibility for legal aid. Recent changes to the legal aid system have meant that some low-income groups are no longer eligible for funds. As the Constitutional Affairs Select Committee’s inquiry into civil legal aid suggested (Para 15):

> At present, the legal aid system is increasingly being restricted to those with no means at all. There is a substantial risk that many people of modest means but who are homeowners will effectively fall out of the ambit of legal aid. In many cases this may amount to a serious denial of access to justice.

Specifically in terms of non-resident parents with low incomes, the change in eligibility criteria can have serious effects. Legal aid can make the difference between being able to make or sustain a legal application for child contact or not. In recent years, the courts have seen an increase of cases where parties represent themselves for financial reasons at the expense of legal understanding and expertise.

### 2.6. Services providing support to non-resident parents and their children

Previous literature has identified that a range of services and sources of information exists specifically to support children who are experiencing parental separation (Hawthorne et al., 2003). However, evaluations of such services are rare, making it difficult to establish which interventions work. With respect to services aimed at supporting non-resident parents together with their children, it has been acknowledged that the range and availability of services is limited (Featherstone, 2003). This is reflected in the relatively small number of interventions identified by this study and in the dearth of evaluations of such services.

A typology of services for non-resident parents and their children has been created from those identified through this review. With the exception of the Family Resolutions Pilot Project, which has both educational and mediation components, these services can generally be classified under six main headings:

- Educational services
- Mediation
2.6.1. Service design

What is clear from the literature is that providing services to fathers in general, and to non-resident fathers in particular, is problematic for a number of reasons. In a study on parenting support by Moran et al., (2004) it is acknowledged that ‘So much of the research on parenting is in fact based on the study of mothering’ (p20) and that ‘most evaluation samples [of parenting programmes] contain insufficient numbers of men to be able to draw definitive conclusions about what works for fathers’ (p116). In the same light, Richard Fletcher, of the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, summarises the current state of affairs with the following:

From the research on fathers’ involvement with childcare over recent decades, it seems evident that simply believing that fathers should be involved with their children is not sufficient to change established roles for mothers and fathers as they go about the care of their children. In the same way, among family services, the belief that fathers should be involved in services for families has not resulted in the successful recruitment of fathers. (Fletcher, 2008, p4)

Both reviews arrive at a similar view, that mothers and fathers diverge in vital respects in terms of their attitudes and expectations in ways that are central to how they access (or fail to access) services. Moran et al show qualitative research which demonstrates that fathers and mothers may want different things from family support services and that because most programmes focus on the needs of mothers, men are less likely to remain engaged. Correspondingly, Fletcher suggests that often fathers are put off relevant services because they are aimed at mothers, from the images used in advertising, the hours that programmes run, the approaches the programmes take, to the gender makeup of staff.

Fletcher also suggests that current programmes may promote forms of parenting that put a higher value on female ways of relating to children. One interesting point, albeit quite intuitively obvious, to come out of this review is that mothers and fathers relate to their children in systematically different ways:

Fathers’ “rough and tumble” play, for example, has been identified not only as being common among fathers and children in many cultures, but also as beneficial for child development (citing Paquette, 2004). There has also been the suggestion that fathers’ interactions with young infants are typically less modulated than mothers’, with more unexpected peaks of excitement, again with positive developmental implications (citing Feldman, 2003, p4).

Fletcher continues by suggesting that there may also be differences in gender attitudes to ‘help-seeking’ that explain the lack of involvement of fathers. The tone of many family services may seek a high level of self-awareness and an ability to talk openly about personal issues that may not suit men who have been socialised into traditional male norms. Therefore, in tailoring services to fathers it may be appropriate either to provide...
them in a way that is sensitive to the fashion in which men communicate or by creating an atmosphere where men feel less constrained by traditional roles.

However, while sensitivity to conventional gender norms can be helpful in tailoring services to fathers, an overly strict adherence to such understanding is likely to cause problems. It has been shown that people who have more stereotypical views about male emotions are more likely to find men culpable for conflict, which is particularly relevant in conflict resolution where counsellors’ assumptions will influence the way they provide the services.

The key suggestion to emerge from these reviews is that staff should be trained to be sensitive to specifically male ways of operating. While this may involve hiring a greater number of male staff, this is by no means the key step. Fletcher argues that simply being a man or a father does not in itself make employees skilled at engaging with fathers and that all staff would benefit from training in this area. Similarly Moran et al found no robust evidence that matching personal attributes of the staff to the users (i.e. having male staff work with fathers) had any effect on keeping parents involved. They suggest that the service users are more likely to focus on the interpersonal skills of the staff rather than their fixed attributes. They do caveat this statement, referencing the study by Ghate et al (2000), arguing that there may be value in having a visible mix of staff as it can be helpful for services to reflect the diversity of the ‘normal world’ (p98).

Fletcher suggests conceptualizing traditionally male roles and attitudes in the same way that one might understand cultural differences. While there are clearly differences between men as a group and ethnic or cultural groups, he argues that this way of looking at it helps distinguish social norms of behaviour from intrinsic male attributes and help undermine fixed assumptions about men. To illustrate this point he references Ming Liu (2005):

> Men are socialized in a specific culture, with values, norms, customs, and expectations, to which men must adhere. Therefore, working effectively with men means an awareness of masculine cultural values and the clinician’s understanding of his/her own assumptions and biases about men. (p7)

One central attribute this requires of staff is the capacity for self-reflection. Indeed, Fletcher argues that this capacity is more important to staff than is experience of working with fathers in the past (although of course these are not mutually exclusive).

Further recommendations, taken from large scale parenting programmes in the UK and the USA present a similar picture. They suggest the following steps to achieve greater father involvement:

- including a clear expectation that fathers should and will participate
- registration forms - providing information on fathers
- hiring practices - having more male staff
- physical environment - providing positive images of fathers
- referral pathways - developing links across agencies
- staff training - on working with men and fatherhood
- changing from mother-focused to father-inclusive publicity.
However, while the study by Moran et al remains optimistic about the central policy climate in the UK and its increased focus on engaging fathers it does highlight the wider social context and the potential obstacle therein. They question ‘how much progress family support services can be expected to make in engaging fathers more centrally in childcare when British fathers work the longest hours of any parents in Europe’ (p131). In looking to the future they argue that the main challenge facing policy makers is not simply to establish what is effective for individual programmes ‘but to provide an overarching policy context which is consistent with parenting support across the entire ‘ecology’ of parenting’ (p131). This might involve legislating to give fathers more flexible working hours.

2.6.2. Family Resolutions Pilot Project

The Family Resolution Pilot Project (FRPP) was a Government funded non-mandatory scheme, the main aim of which was to help separated parents reach agreement about arrangements for their children and obviate the need for adversarial court proceedings. FRPP also aimed to produce longer-lasting agreements that were in the child’s best interests and to facilitate increased collaboration between parents. Rather than focusing on more entrenched cases, FRPP was intended to be an early intervention programme. The project ran from September 2004 to August 2005 in three areas in England - Brighton, Inner London and Sunderland - during which time it received 62 court referrals.

FRPP consisted of four components:

- initial risk assessment
- a group work/parental education stage to raise parental awareness of children’s experiences of parental separation and conflict and develop parents’ abilities to manage family conflict
- a parent planning stage involving two or three meetings with Cafcass to enable parents to work together to construct workable, flexible arrangements for them and their children
- meetings with children to establish their hopes and feelings.

An evaluation of the pilot was carried out by Trinder et al (2006) to examine the process and outcomes of the FRPP, along with the perceptions and experiences of parents and professionals. It should be noted that the findings are based on small sample sizes and on parents’ self-reported, rather than observed, changes in behaviour. Interviews were carried out with 52 professionals and 67 parents (54% response rate) across the three pilot areas.

The results from the evaluation showed that for parents who became well embedded in FRPP, a number were able to make agreements about the children’s residence and contact. However, results on the effect of the pilot on the number of children having contact with their non-resident parent, on parental satisfaction and on whether parents would recommend the programme to others suggest that FRPP is no more or less effective than mediation.

The educational component of the pilot was found to have a positive impact on the parental relationship: parents who completed the pilot were significantly more likely to report that the parental relationship had improved. However, one third of parents
reported no change in relationships and overall the results suggest that the pilot worked best with 'easier' cases.

The evaluation identified that the group work stage of the programme led to some positive outcomes. It was found that being part of a group which shared similar circumstances offered a key opportunity for parents to discuss their experiences and receive support, which in turn reduced their feelings of isolation. In addition, the format and make-up of the groups (mixed sex groups, two sessions) meant that for the first time parents were able to start acknowledging their former partner's concerns through listening to opposite gender parents in their group.

Trinder et al conclude that the pilot evaluation gives a clear indication of what types of intervention are needed to give the best possible chance of achieving positive outcomes for both parents and children and for establishing contact that works. These include: a risk assessment and management process; a negotiation process; and an educational/therapeutic intervention.

2.6.3. Educational services in the UK

Education programmes for divorcing or separating parents were developed in the USA during the 1970s and later applied in the UK in response to recognition of the effects of parental separation on families and children in particular. Taking the format of group meetings, their focus is on facilitating a more positive divorce process through parental education rather than mediation or counselling.

Parent Information Programme

Family Mediation Scotland (FMS) introduced the Parent Information Programme (PIP) as a pilot in Edinburgh, Paisley, Greenock, Bearsden and Dumbarton in 1996 following research into parent education programmes in the USA. The programme is on-going.

PIP is delivered through a series of two-hour meetings, with partners attending separately but as part of a mixed group with other parents to look at issues including co-operative parenting, the voice of the child and the law. Parents are helped to understand how separation can impact on both them and their children and how they might reduce the long-term adverse effects that parental separation could have on the family. PIP also aims to help parents recognise that conflict and legal battles will inevitably have a detrimental effect on their children and provides parents with a range of information on relevant support services.

An evaluation of PIP was conducted in 2000 by Mayes et al using semi-structured interviews with service users at three points in time: prior to their first PIP session; after the intervention; and six months later. Focus groups and in-depth interviews with children, service providers and with representatives from the legal profession were also undertaken.

The authors outline a number of key findings from their research but the very low number of parents who participated in the evaluation (12, falling to nine at the six-month follow-up stage) must be borne in mind. Overall, views of PIP were very positive and a high level of parental satisfaction was found. In general, respondents felt that PIP had been helpful and had given them useful information for reducing the adverse effects of separation on their children. Parents also commented that PIP had impressed upon them
the importance of being child-centred in their post-separation decision making. The small number of participants present at the sessions and initial feelings of embarrassment were the most significant negative factors mentioned by respondents.

Mayes et al found evidence that the programme had caused parents to re-evaluate their attitudes, especially in relation to communication with their former partner and their children. However, results from the follow-up interviews presented little evidence that the changes in attitude among parents had resulted in significant alterations to parenting arrangements or had led to any long-term behavioural changes such as a reduction in conflict.

Service providers recommended that a parent information service should be available early on in the separation process and suggested that the adoption of a format of a number of weekly sessions with parents would be the most effective way of achieving positive outcomes.

Mayes et al concluded that PIP is an excellent prototype for services aiming to reduce the trauma and adverse effects of parental separation on the family and for providing information and advice. However, the authors state that implementation issues, for example the limited referral routes into PIP and the lack of emphasis on raising awareness of the programme amongst potential referrers such as solicitors, contributed to the limited number of programme participants which did not allow the intervention to maximise its potential.

In attempting to understand the low uptake of the programme, Mayes et al highlight as a key factor the conflicting philosophies of programmes such as PIP, which emphasise open discussion and co-operation between all parties, and the legal profession, which is often of the opinion that open dialogue of this kind is not in their client’s best interest. The authors go on to suggest that this difficulty could be addressed by involving lawyer mediators in the delivery of PIP. The authors also comment that half of the parents involved in the evaluation expressed a need for personal support but that the PIP literature urged parents to put their own needs aside to focus on their children.

Two other UK educational services that were identified in the course of this review are Relate’s ‘Moving Forward’ and ‘Parents Apart’ courses. Moving Forward is a five session course for the recently divorced or separated, the objectives of which include learning why relationships go wrong, building relationship skills and understanding the impact that divorce or separation has on children, family and friends. The Parents Apart course aims to educate divorced and separated parents on how to be co-parents, on dealing with conflict, improving communication skills, making contact arrangements and developing strong parent-child relationships after separation. Relate’s website gives information on dates and locations throughout the UK where these courses are running. No evaluations of either of these courses could be identified.

2.6.4. Educational programmes in other countries

Educational programmes in the USA are provided through the family courts and by community mental health practitioners. These programmes aim to increase parental understanding of the effects of divorce and separation on children, improve the co-parental relationship, resolve conflict, and strengthen the relationship between parents and children.
A large number of parent education and information interventions have been developed in the USA. Blaisure and Geasler (1996a) estimated from their national survey that around 1,500 of these services were in existence in 1998, but pointed out that evaluations of such services are few in number and rarely systematic or robust (Blaisure and Geasler, 1996b). Robust evaluations of two US educational programmes were identified in the course of this review.

Dads for Life

The Dads for Life (DFL) programme was developed by the Prevention Research Centre at Arizona State University and was funded by a 5-year grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). The DFL programme is based on those features of non-resident fathers’ experience that research has established as being crucial to the well-being of both children and non-resident fathers. These include improving a father’s relationship with his children (which subsumes increasing the quantity and quality of contact), improving his relationship with the former partner, and reducing inter-parental conflict.

DFL consists of eight, weekly group sessions, each lasting one and three-quarter hours, and two individual sessions of three-quarters of an hour. Homework assignments are also set. The group sessions have a number of aims, which include motivating fathers to maintain regular attendance, increasing fathers’ commitment to their role as parents, and teaching parenting and interpersonal skills such as disciplining, communication and listening, and conflict management. Parenting skills are tailored to the demands and constraints of the situation of a non-residential parent. The group sessions also incorporate discussions and role-playing, and provide literature on relevant legal issues and local recreational and educational facilities for children. In the two individual sessions that the fathers receive, they are helped to personalise what they have learnt from the group sessions and tailor it to the individual circumstances and obstacles they face.

The evaluation of DFL by Braver et al (2005) consisted of a pre-test, post-test, four-month and one-year follow-up experimental field trial, with fathers randomly assigned either to the DFL group or to a self-study control group. The evaluation looked at a number of outcomes including changes in fathers’ and children’s behaviour and acceptability of the intervention to the programme’s target population. For non-resident fathers to be eligible for inclusion in the sample their divorce had to have taken place in the previous four to 10 months and they had to have at least one child aged between four and 12 years old. The DFL group consisted of 127 fathers with 87 in the control group. Data were also collected from the participants’ former wives and from children and their teachers.

Results from the evaluation were found to be encouraging, especially with regard to outcomes for participants’ children. Reports of reductions in child problems and internalising behaviour were given not only by non-resident fathers but also by their former wives, the majority of whom had no knowledge of their former husband’s participation in DFL. Twelve months later, the impacts of the DFL programme on these children remained.

Braver et al note that the fact that DFL precluded participation of residential fathers and non-residential mothers was an important factor for the high level of participation in the
programme: non-resident fathers felt that they were able to discuss their experiences without fear of judgement and that they were understood. The authors recommend that successful programmes should not only attempt to change fathers but also respect and empower them. They conclude that more research is needed on the palatability of services for non-resident parents and to answer how, why and for whom such interventions work.

**The Children in the Middle Programme**

This two-hour educational programme for divorcing parents was developed by the Centre for Divorce Education in Ohio and is still in operation. Children in the Middle (CIM) uses interactive rather than didactic teaching methods and focuses on reducing children's exposure to conflict by developing parents' conflict-resolution skills. The programme has been extensively evaluated: one of the most robust studies was conducted by Arbuthnot *et al* (1996). In their study, parents were randomly allocated to either the CIM or to another information-oriented class, and the findings were compared with a control group of divorcing parents in another state without parent education.

The evaluators found that children’s exposure to conflict reduced in both the educational groups when compared with the control group. Parents in the CIM group had significantly improved communication skills, and they were also more willing than those in the control group to share their children’s time equally (Arbuthnot and Kramer, 1998). Over a two-year period, they were also less likely to re-litigate any issue (Arbuthnot *et al*, 1997).

It was suggested that the following distinctive features of the CIM programme contributed to its effectiveness: a specific focus on reducing child exposure to conflict rather than covering a range of issues; the use of interactive teaching strategies; and the focus on skill development as opposed to simply imparting information.

### 2.6.5. Support for high conflict families

**In-court Conciliation**

In-court conciliation is a form of dispute resolution used in the early stages of family law proceedings. Its purpose is normally to help parents negotiate an agreement about the disputed matter without recourse to further legal action.

In their study of in-court conciliation in the UK Trinder *et al* (2006) aimed to identify whether conciliation was beneficial and which sorts of conciliation were the most effective. They distinguished between conciliation methods where judges had a high level of control in the proceedings and those where they had low or mixed levels of involvement. Their findings indicated that models of in-court conciliation which involve low levels of judicial control gained higher levels of approval from the parents and also achieved higher levels of agreement between the parents in resolving contact or residence disputes. However, they also demonstrated that higher levels of agreement in court did not translate into better relations between the parents, which, as shown in the previous section, is a key factor in making contact work for children. They were also critical of the haste in which these conciliation sessions were conducted, stating that the average meeting was no longer than 45 minutes. This meant that the sessions could be coercive and risked excluding the child. In conclusion they expressed optimism about the potential for in-court conciliation while suggesting that it was not suitable for all cases and not sufficient to tackle many problems related to family separation.
These findings have been supplemented recently by the same researchers (Trinder and Kellet, 2007), returning to the project to assess the long-term effects of in-court conciliation on parental agreement and re-litigation rates. This study suggested that in-court conciliation did not provide long-term solutions to the families involved, the majority of whom had needed to involve further professional help in the intervening two years, including a large minority that had had to return to court to seek new orders. Perhaps most importantly, they argued that it had had ‘very limited impact on making contact actually work well for children’. Nevertheless they did indicate that in the short term it was an effective way of gaining consensus on contact, which can be important in keeping both parents involved in their child’s life. The study went on to recommend the introduction of a more therapeutic form of conciliation that focused on the strong emotions involved in parental separation as a way of fostering better outcomes, or potentially going further than that and recasting the whole issue as one of public health rather than a legal matter and seeking to set up community-based resources for helping families through separation.

This kind of in-court dispute resolution has gained some momentum in recent years since the release of the Private Law Programme in 2004 by the President of the Family Law Division. This states that every case should have an early First Hearing dispute resolution appointment. As a result, Cafcass is increasingly turning to in-court conciliation and dispute resolution techniques. Their 2006-07 Annual Report reveals that the increase in Family Court Advisor time spent on dispute resolution work for divorcing and separating parents in private law cases has resulted in an increase in their interventions achieving full or partial agreement, as well as a reduction in the number of court reports into the welfare of children (Section 7 reports) which they have had to produce.

The search for US educational interventions revealed two specialist programmes for high conflict families. The first, Parents Apart, follows on from the recent development in the USA of parallel parenting approaches that emphasise disengagement between former partners, with each parenting independently. Parents Apart is a five-hour programme that aims to reduce the opportunities for conflict to occur by advising parents to terminate all direct contact with one another for a two-year period, communicating even indirectly as little as possible. Parents operate on the basis of an unchanged parenting plan, and separate worlds are created within which to parent the children (Stacer and Stemen, 2000). Evaluation information was not available for this programme.

The second educational intervention for high conflict families is an older, more traditional programme called Parenting without Conflict. This intervention works with parents who are in breach of court orders or those involved in intense conflict or chronic litigation. Parenting without Conflict has several aims, including increasing parental awareness of the effects of their behaviour on their children, developing conflict resolution and communication skills, and sending a strong message to the resident parent of their responsibility to encourage contact. It also emphasises the importance of resolving disputes by negotiation and mediation rather than litigation. The programme consists of six two-hour group sessions which parents attend separately, lectures, group discussions, role-play,, and skill practice sessions.

In an evaluation of the Parenting without Conflict programme carried out by Johnston (1999), 27% of non-resident fathers reported increased contact with their children and
62% reported a general improvement in their relationship with their former partner. However, half reported continuing problems.

2.6.6. Mediation

Mediation services dealing with parental separation aim to reduce the negative effects of separation on both partners and children by helping parents work towards mutual agreement on various issues, including finances, parenting and contact arrangements.

Mediation in England and Wales

National Family Mediation (NFM) is a network of over 60 local, not-for-profit mediation services across England and Wales. The overall aim of the services is to achieve practical and workable arrangements that are acceptable to both the resident and non-resident parent and their children. Some NFM services receive financial support through partnership grants from Cafcass and from local authorities, but they are largely funded under block individual service contracts from the Legal Services Commission (LSC) for work done. The contracts are worked out by the LSC on three-monthly cumulative work returns and are subject to a re-evaluation when there is a consistent fluctuation of plus or minus 10% from the contract.

NFM’s trained mediators aim to help families who are experiencing relationship breakdown by working with both parents to improve their communication and to facilitate successful negotiations. The preferred model is that parents meet together with a mediator, although ‘shuttle mediation’, where the mediator works individually with each parent, might be used where necessary, for example when couples have difficulty being in the same room with each other. However, the latter is not ideal as it can lend itself to difficulties in the final negotiation and to a lack of effective challenging of statements by the clients during the process. Children can also be included in the mediation process if both parents agree: this ensures that children’s concerns and wishes are taken into consideration. The LSC, however, does not fund child consultation. The cost of this is usually met from pre-set contracts with Cafcass that tend to reduce from year to year. Occasionally, Cafcass refers clients to mediation for child-only work. Mediation is not therapy and is time-limited. Under current LSC funding, a maximum of nine hours is paid to reach agreements on residence, contact, finance and property combined, and a maximum of three face-to-face mediation hours is paid for the resolution of issues related to the child (primarily residence and contact).

The National Audit Office has recently examined the effectiveness and value for money of mediation services (NAO, 2007). It found that mediation was an effective way of reducing the amount of time that cases spend in court and suggested that more should be done to encourage people to use the service. They identified disincentives to use these services, such as the distance people had to travel to receive the service. However, the study focused largely on the potential financial savings that this course of action would have on the legal aid budget and did not propose a strong case for its long-term benefits for families.

Previous evaluations of mediation by the Relate Centre for Family Studies have pointed to the fact that reaching agreements during mediation can have a significant impact on the quality of post-divorce life. Those people for whom mediation was instrumental in helping them to reach agreements tended to feel less bitterness and resentment towards former partners and were able to establish closer relationships with them, and
communicate more regularly about issues concerned with the raising of children (McCarthy and Walker, 1996).

**Family Mediation Scotland**

A network of mediation services with similar aims exists in Scotland. Family Mediation Scotland (FMS) provides a free service to parents who want to enter into negotiation on issues relating to their children, especially over arrangements for contact and future care. Parents meet with trained mediators separately at first and then, if appropriate, they attend a number of sessions together.

Aware that its services were under-utilised by minority ethnic communities in Scotland and wishing to understand the reasons for low uptake, FMS commissioned an evaluation of its services (Pankaj, 2000), focusing on the views and attitudes of different minority ethnic groups (Pakistani, Indian, Chinese and Black African/Caribbean) on family breakdown, counselling and mediation.

Findings from the study suggested that family mediation services are relevant and required by minority ethnic families in Scotland and that the concept of family mediation does not conflict with the religious or cultural norms of any community. However, there were important issues that needed to be addressed to enhance usage and accessibility of such services. These included factors such as the availability of more minority ethnic mediators, especially those with the ability to speak other languages; the perception of minority ethnic groups that counselling services are not as professional as, for example, doctors and lawyers; and the fact that FMS support is available only to separating and divorcing families, rather than to those considering separation.

Other key recommendations stemming from the research were that better training for staff was essential in order to increase their cultural awareness and sensitivity, mediation services should network with minority ethnic organisations to foster trust and increase the number of referrals they receive, and that mediators should, perhaps, be located in these ethnic minority organisations.

**Other mediation services**

Other services providing mediation for families experiencing separation include Coram Family and the children’s charity NCH, which runs a number of mediation services across the UK, including a service in London called Eye To Eye, which predominantly works with African-Caribbean families. Eye To Eye has a multicultural team of professional mediators; the aims of the service include helping separated parents to communicate more effectively and to reduce conflict, in order to minimise the effects of parental separation on children, helping parents to reach equitable agreements on property and finance, and promoting shared responsibility between parents for the care of their children. Some of NCH’s family mediation services also provide contact centre services, where non-resident parents can spend time with their children at a neutral venue.

**2.6.7. Mediation in other countries**

**Research**

In the field of mediation, many of the good examples come from Australia. Macintosh and Long, in a study conducted in 2006, compared two sorts of post-separation
mediation. One was child-focused interventions, where the parents are brought together to think about the child’s best interests and try to establish workable parenting arrangements. The other was child-inclusive interventions, where the children are also interviewed and their views presented to the parents as part of the discussion. The research suggested that both approaches are associated with better outcomes for the families, including less conflict between the parents, and a greater ability to find resolutions to problems relating to contact. However, in the case of child-inclusive mediation, there were additional benefits, particularly with regard to the father’s relationship with the child. In a follow-up survey taken a year after the initial intervention, the researcher found that those families that had used the child inclusive approach reported:

- Lower acrimony from fathers in relation to their former spouses
- Greater improvement in the parental alliance for fathers
- Children experiencing improved emotional availability of their fathers and greater sense of closeness to them
- Greater contentment of children with care and contact arrangements, and less inclination to want to change them
- Greater satisfaction of fathers with care and contact arrangements of their children, despite initially lower levels of overnight contact than fathers who used ‘child-focused’ mediation
- Greater stability of care and contact patterns over the year
- Preservation or improvement of the mother-child relationship, from the perspectives of both mother and child (Mackintosh and Long, 2006).

In the USA, a mediation programme for high conflict families called the Alameda Model of Impasse Mediation has been developed by Janet Johnston, a leading researcher in the field of high conflict divorce and parental alienation at San Jose State University.

The California-based programme consists of 27 hours over a 12-week period and begins with a phase of assessment and individual counselling with each parent and the child, with information from the children’s sessions used to counsel and sensitise parents to their children’s experience of parental separation and its effect upon them. Following this is a dispute resolution phase with any formulated agreements reviewed by lawyers. The counsellor remains available to the family in emergencies and for continued mediation for an unspecified period.

An evaluation of this model by Pruett and Johnston (2004) found a marked decline in hostility and conflict between parents. Eighty-three per cent of parents referred to the Alameda programme by the courts, having failed in alternative mediation, were able to reach agreement, and two years later, 60% had adhered to or successfully re-negotiated arrangements.

Family Relationship Centres
Family Relationship Centres (FRC) are an innovation from the Australian Government, designed to cater for many related family needs in one place. Launched in 2006, as part of the reforms in family law, there are now 65 FRCs across the country. Their main areas of operation are;
• Building and strengthening existing relationships
• Early intervention and prevention services
• Child-friendly services for families in conflict
• Family dispute resolution services
• Parenting plans
• Re-partnering and step-family arrangements
• Child-focused workshops and information and referral
• Child-inclusive workshops.

There has not been a comprehensive evaluation of these centres so far, although one is under way, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and expected to be completed by December 2009.

2.6.8. Contact centres

Contact centres were developed in the UK in the mid 1980s by a range of voluntary agencies as a response to rising concerns about the numbers of children who were losing contact with their non-resident parent. This coincided with the identification in the research literature that a good relationship with non-resident fathers had measurable links to children’s well-being (Zill, 1983; Peterson and Zill, 1986). The aim of these centres is to provide a short-term service to facilitate contact between children and non-resident family members by providing a neutral and safe environment for families to meet. It is estimated that there are now at least 520 contact centres in the UK, 280 being directly affiliated with the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC). The Association has published a directory of contact centres and provides details of centres throughout the UK on its website. Whilst some centres accept self-referrals, most referrals are made via solicitors, family court welfare officers, social services, family mediation and Relate.

The majority of centres offer supported contact where staff keep a very general eye on families and give help when it is required. Around 12% of centres provide supervised contact for individual families in cases where the court considers there to be concerns over safety or deems that assessment of contact is needed. Approximately 8% of contact centres offer a range of additional services that can include mediation, counselling and play therapy (Hunt and Roberts, 2004). Organisations that offer contact centre services include NCH, the Association of Shared Parenting (see page 33) and Coram Family, which provides both supported and supervised contact.

In 2004 the National Centre for Social Research conducted an evaluation of contact centres in Scotland (Sproston et al., 2004). The aims of the research were to examine the expectations and experiences of referrers, users and workers of contact centres and ascertain their views on the outcomes of using these centres. Discussion groups and qualitative interviews were conducted with referrers and staff from 15 contact centres and with 29 parents and 11 children.

Referrals to the centres came from a range of sources including social workers, mediation services and through self-referral, with the majority of families (75%) being referred via the courts or solicitors. Users of the contact centres were largely positive in their views of the service, believing that they provided a unique service for children and
their families and an opportunity for contact to occur where other alternatives had failed. Service users reported the referral process as being quick and straightforward on the whole. The centres were seen as safe, child-friendly venues and the neutrality and unobtrusiveness of the staff were factors central to families’ positive experiences of the centres. The evaluation found that use of the contact centres often resulted in an improvement in the relationship between parents, with more contact being agreed as trust developed.

Service users did, however, highlight a number of concerns and negative aspects surrounding their experience of using the centres. A lack of knowledge amongst some referrers of the location, opening times and remit of the contact centres with respect to the form of contact and level of supervision offered meant that users’ prior knowledge about the centres was limited and their expectations were often inaccurate. For example, many non-resident parents were concerned that staff would be reporting back to the court the details of their contact sessions and that this might influence decisions on the contact they would have with their children in the future. This heightened the anxiety felt by non-resident parents prior to their first visit to the centre and could potentially have been a factor that discouraged some from using the service at all.

Concerns were raised by some non-resident parents about the time it had taken for referrers to contact the centre co-ordinators to instigate the referral process. They reported finding such delays very upsetting as they felt they were missing out on even more of their child’s life. Other difficulties included the restricted and often inconvenient opening times of the centres, the long waiting lists due to the limited numbers of available places and a lack of resources which meant that for some non-resident parents it was extremely difficult for them to increase the amount of contact they had with their children.

Some non-resident parents were unhappy about the lack of privacy offered by the centres and felt uncomfortable that they had to share a room with several other families, describing how they felt this interfered with the interaction they had with their children. A number of children interviewed said that they became bored with attending the centre after a time because of the limited range of activities offered and the lack of space, and voiced their preference for contact to occur outside the centre.

Non-resident parents, staff and referrers viewed contact centres as stepping stones to unsupported contact with arrangements becoming self-regulated. However, this view often conflicted with that of resident parents who foresaw the need for the centres’ services on a much more long-term basis. The effect of this difference of opinion became apparent from the interviews with non-resident parents: contact within the centre was seen by them as impeding the development of self-regulated contact outside of the service.

In terms of identifying outcomes and impacts, although the contact centres often knew families’ short-term situations they rarely knew the longer-term outcomes: a factor contributing to this could be the high turnover of staff, which was a problem that was persistently reported in the course of the evaluation. Sproston et al concluded that a more systematic and comprehensive monitoring of the long-term outcomes for families is essential in order to establish what type of contact works for families in different situations and what helps to maximise the development of relationships and self-regulation of contact.
The Government is committed to contact centres as interventions to support non-resident parents and their children and to extending the provision of these services throughout the UK. In its 2005 publication *Parental Separation – Next Steps*, the Government said it had identified £3m and £4.5m of additional funding for 2006/07 and 2007/08 respectively to develop contact centres. In conjunction with NACCC, they are looking to develop a broader range of services to support contact between children and non-resident family members in, for example, extended schools and children’s centres.

However, it is the view of Hunt and Roberts (2004) that contact centres should be seen not as a panacea but as only one aspect of the range of services that are needed to support non-resident parents and their children. Indeed a model for contact centres that is being explored internationally is Amplified Contact Supervision (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999; Mueller-Johnston, 2005). This is the addition of complementary services within or linked closely to centres. These might include counselling, education and therapeutic supervision which would aim to improve the parental relationship and parent-child interaction.

In line with this view, a comprehensive evaluation of contact centres in Australia recommended that to improve the current service offered, other services could be added to their remit. They suggested including counselling services for the individual parents or children, parenting skills classes, and mediation or conciliation services for the parents to try to improve contact arrangements. In this sense they recommend an ‘integrated social services model’, whereby parents could ask for referrals to other services if they so wished. The factor that was deemed to have the greatest impact on the quality of the service was the stability of government funding, which is likely also to be the case in the UK. Centres that had no government funding were restricted to a ‘contact only’ model of service and relied on volunteers to supervise high conflict cases (Sheenan *et al*, 2005).

### 2.6.9. Voluntary support and advice services in the UK

**Parentline Plus**

Parentline Plus operates a national, free telephone help-line and e-mail service that offers support and advice to parents and which signposts callers to other sources of help. The accessibility of Parentline Plus means that it is able to offer support to groups such as non-resident fathers and parents from ethnic minorities who are less likely to engage with traditional family services.

An evaluation by Boddy *et al* (2004) found that Parentline Plus provides support to more than 5,000 callers a month. Analysis of calls to the service over a 15-month period from October 2001 to December 2002 showed that fathers made 12% of all calls to the helpline. Boddy *et al* found that after ‘mental health and emotional issues’, ‘adult divorce issues’ were the most frequently cited reason for contacting the service: 32% of fathers and 15% of mothers called the helpline for support around this issue.

In 2004 Parentline Plus published a report looking specifically at the concerns and experiences of fathers who had contacted its helpline. The study revealed that 61% of fathers wanted to talk about issues around divorce and separation, 37% expressed concerns over couple disagreements and conflict, and 21% of fathers wanted to talk about contact issues. The report also found high levels of self-reported anxiety and stress amongst fathers calling Parentline Plus: 63% spoke of their acute anxiety and
nearly half talked about the stress they were experiencing. Boddy et al conclude that the service provides a route to support for parents whose needs are not being met by other types of service provision.

The Dawn Project
The Dawn Project was established by the Diocese of Sheffield in 1997 and works throughout the region of South Yorkshire. The service was founded to address the needs of families experiencing separation or divorce and it runs a number of initiatives for parents and children. Workshops for parents and young people are provided and issues surrounding communication, conflict, managing feelings and maintaining contact with the non-resident parent/child are discussed. No formal evaluation of the Dawn Project has taken place, though the workshops are assessed by individual participants in terms of their usefulness and perceived outcomes.

Association for Shared Parenting
The Association for Shared Parenting (ASP) is a registered charity operating in Leicester and Area 2 which aims to ‘promote the child’s right to the nurture of both parents after separation or divorce and to encourage and support parents in the fulfilment of that right’. The Association offers advice and support to help parents maintain or re-establish contact with their children and promotes the need for non-resident parents to play an equal part in the raising of their child. The service holds advice and support sessions once a month and operates a telephone advice line which provides information on a range of legal issues, including how the court system works, choosing and making best use of a solicitor and preparing for meetings with the Family Court Welfare Service. ASP runs a Saturday afternoon contact centre in Area 2 where non-resident parents and their children can meet in a neutral environment. It also signposts users to other relevant services offering advice or legal support. There has been no evaluation of the ASP service.

Families Need Fathers
Founded in 1974, Families Need Fathers (FNF) is primarily concerned with maintaining a child’s relationship with both parents during and following family breakdown. FNF believes that children have a right to a continuing relationship with both parents, that parents should be treated equally and that shared parenting should be encouraged because each parent makes a unique contribution to the development of their child.

FNF holds self-help branch meetings in 29 areas across the UK; they provide support and advice through their national helpline and internet forums and run parenting support workshops. In addition, FNF works to increase awareness of the effects of family breakdown through a range of initiatives including lobbying Parliament and the legal profession, responding to Government consultations and by participating in family policy forums and seminars. No evaluation of FNF has been carried out.

2.6.10. Voluntary support and advice services in the other countries

The Divorced Fathers Network
This California-based service is a not-for-profit, peer-support organisation which promotes engaged, effective fathering during and after divorce. The Divorced Fathers Network offers emotional support to non-resident fathers at free weekly meetings, and on an individual basis, and runs co-parenting classes where skills to build shared parenting
relationships are developed and information on mediation and counselling services is shared. No evaluations of this service could be identified.

**Fathers’ and Children’s Equality**

Fathers’ and Children’s Equality (FACE) was founded in 1978 and operates in 12 localities in Pennsylvania and five in New Jersey, advocating the right of both parents to have full access to their children and an end to parental alienation and the systematic denigration of one parent by the other, with the intent of distancing (psychologically) the child from the other parent. FACE runs self-help support groups for non-resident parents, covering issues such as fathers’ rights, non-resident parent’s rights, shared parenting and child contact. It also provides parenting education programmes for separating families. The service aims to minimise the effects of parental separation and to reduce the number of adversarial divorce and custodial proceedings. No evaluation of this service could be identified.

### 2.6.11. Legal and signposting services

**The Family Advice and Information Network Service**

The Family Advice and Information Network Service (FAlNS) was initiated in 2001 by the Lord Chancellor as a pilot project that builds on existing services and best practice. By 2003 the service was operating in 16 areas in England and Wales with expansion into further areas planned. FAlNS, managed by the Legal Services Commission, was staffed by family solicitors and acted as a single point of reference through which people could access a range of services. The service aimed to facilitate the dissolution of broken relationships in ways that minimised distress to parents and children and promoted ongoing family relationships and co-operative parenting. FAlNS solicitors were able to give legal advice and representation if necessary, while also providing tailored information and help in accessing services, such as mediation, that might assist in resolving disputes.

A research team led by the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne conducted a comprehensive evaluation of FAlNS, funded by the Legal Services Commission: the final report was published in 2007. The evaluators concluded that FAlNS did not seem to have brought about much change in family law practice. They found that there had been marginal changes in the way family law solicitors provided their service but that unless all solicitors were required to adopt the FAlNS framework it would be unlikely to make a great deal of difference. There was resistance on both sides to the increased role of the solicitors: the clients were uncomfortable talking to their lawyer about non-legal matters, and the solicitors were reluctant to become involved in the other issues surrounding family separation. There was a general recognition of the benefit of more integrated services in the field of parental separation but the solicitors in the study felt that it was not their place to take a lead on such matters.

**Boot-camp for Dads**

This initiative from the USA looks to engage expectant fathers, particularly before the birth of their first child, to provide advice, support and education on issues relating to becoming a father. It operates on a peer-support basis where experienced fathers support younger men in gaining important parenting skills. This initiative seeks to support fathers in establishing good attachments to their children soon after birth, as evidence suggests that when this happens the fathers are more likely to remain an ongoing part of
their lives. Research shows that men are particularly receptive to education and behaviour change in the months surrounding the birth of their children (Princeton University, 2001). Moreover, gaining valuable parenting skills can do much to allay mothers' fears of the fathers’ ability to look after the child, which is often a factor in the mothers’ reluctance to allow contact.

2.6.12. Internet-based services

Many ‘virtual’ services exist in both the UK and USA, for example the Equal Parenting Council, Amnesty 4 Families, the ManKind Initiative and the Shared Parenting Information Group. Accessed via the internet, their primary aim is to promote and lobby for equal and shared parenting rights. Few offer direct support to non-resident parents or their children but they usually signpost users to legal and statutory services and lobbying groups.

Shared Parenting Information Group

The Shared Parenting Information Group (SPIG) is a UK web-based not-for-profit organisation that works to encourage and promote shared parenting after separation or divorce. This service recognises that, wherever possible, it is of vital importance that both the resident and non-resident parent should have a strong role in their children’s lives. It takes the view that children should spend substantial amounts of time living with each parent so that they can develop a meaningful relationship with each one. According to SPIG, shared parenting prevents the widespread dissatisfaction that children and parents have with traditional, artificial contact arrangements that often result in the non-resident parent relegated to the role of an infrequent visitor.

While SPIG does not provide a direct service to non-resident parents and their children, it does make information available on parenting plans, the legal system and parenting advice, and it signposts parents to a range of other relevant services such as mediation and contact centres. The service is also actively engaged in lobbying for the presumption of shared residence after separation or divorce and for change in what they see as gender-based inequalities in existing welfare and judicial practice.

Dad Info

Dad Info is an integrated fathers’ information service on the internet, providing advice, information and signposting to other services to cater for all aspects of being a father. It provides information on pregnancy, work arrangements, housing, relationships, separation and on other relevant subjects.

2.7. Summary and Conclusions

2.7.1. The UK context

In 2001, one in four dependent children lived in a lone-parent family and one in ten lived in a step-family (ONS, 2001). It is estimated that somewhere around 30% of of these children have no contact with their father. However, little information exists on the number of non-resident fathers or their demographic characteristics and personal circumstances. Estimates suggest that 15% of babies are born to parents who do not live together and that divorce accounts for the largest group of non-resident fathers.
Breakdown of cohabitation is thought to be the fastest growing source of non-resident fathers.

There is a clear need for further information concerning the scale of non-resident parenthood and the needs of this group, particularly concerning how they can be better supported to maintain contact with their children.

2.7.2. The legal position of non-resident fathers

The legal rights and responsibilities of non-resident fathers are not codified in one statute and are typically not well understood by parents. Many fathers, and in particular those who were never married, fail to understand their position after separation. There is, in fact, no explicit automatic right to continuing active parenthood in such cases, but since 2003 unmarried fathers have been able to share parental responsibility with the mother if they register the birth jointly. This means they retain the right to participate in important decisions about the child - for example, decisions about where a child is to live, whether a child can receive medical treatment, what religion they follow and which school they attend.

There is a need for accessible and understandable information for all fathers to ensure that they are fully informed about their rights and responsibilities.

2.7.3. Current policy on non-resident fathers

Emphasis has previously been placed on the financial role of non-resident fathers, but policy is increasingly recognising the benefits to children – and to society - of their being more actively involved in their children’s lives. This is becoming increasingly important with the increasing number of non-traditional family structures. However, the law has not been revised to reflect policy initiatives and to meet the needs of non-resident fathers. Many unmarried fathers face an uphill struggle legally and financially, which may overwhelm those in disadvantaged circumstances. The priority has continued to be the father’s requirement to contribute financially while the issue of contact with their child, particularly for never-married fathers, has not been addressed.

There needs to be a rationalisation between policy and law to ensure that all never-married fathers are granted the automatic right to shared parental responsibility, as is the case for divorced fathers, taking into account the best interests of the child. There also needs to be a more concerted recognition within policy of the support, other than financial, that non-resident fathers offer their children.

2.7.4. Contact and financial support: evidence on outcomes for children

Research suggests that contact between the non-resident father and his child, when sustained in a cooperative parenting environment, is beneficial for the child in a number of ways: his/her well-being; increased educational attainment; decreased likelihood of engaging in anti-social behaviour; and the formation of satisfactory adult relationships. These positive effects can be diminished by a number of factors, including, most significantly, the absence of financial support from the non-resident parent. Children living in poorer households with non-resident fathers who do not make financial contributions to their upbringing have poorer outcomes compared with children of non-resident fathers who do contribute financially or with children in more affluent homes.
living without their biological father present. The other key factor that adversely affects outcomes for the child is ongoing conflict between the two parents.

There is a need to support fathers in their ability and motivation to contribute financially to the upbringing of their child. To some extent this might be better facilitated by ensuring access to education and training to create better employment chances and thus enable fathers to pay. Increasing their motivation to do so would require a different approach, especially where financial support and contact are seen as some kind of trade-off. Enabling contact, provided it is in the child’s best interests, might reinforce a father’s inclination to maintain him/her in a regular way and increase his perceived ‘return’ on financial contributions. There is also a need to focus on techniques that may reduce conflict between separating parents and that encourage them to place the child’s needs at the centre of their thinking.

2.7.5. The needs of non-resident fathers and barriers to contact

The literature identified three main areas that could inhibit contact between non-resident fathers and their children resulting from the father’s own needs and external difficulties they may face. These fell broadly into the following categories.

Financial and economic circumstances
Non-resident fathers who are unable to make financial contributions to their child’s welfare are likely to see their child less often and establish less healthy relationships with them and their former partner than those who do provide financial support. Unemployed fathers are considerably more likely to have little or no contact with their children.

Assessments for child support by the CSA in the past have caused considerable discontent among some non-resident fathers, particularly where payments have been revised and contact with the child disputed. The reform of the system may alleviate some of the hostility between parents which has arisen from previous CSA involvement in their case.

Poor non-resident fathers may face difficulties in obtaining housing suitable to accommodate their child during contact periods. Policy means that single men without resident children are not a housing priority. Non-resident fathers may also be financially disadvantaged owing to the policy of the child support allowance and other benefits following the parent who has been allocated/assumed the main carer role – this is the case even if the child spends a significant amount of time per week with the other parent.

Relational and psychological needs
Becoming a non-resident parent can impact upon a father’s sense of identity and self-worth, creating a prolonged period of emotional and psychological distress that may ultimately lead to the suspension of contact with their child. The need to maintain a relationship with a former partner - the gatekeeper to child contact - can also be conflict-ridden, negating the positive effects of contact with the child and the child’s overall well-being.

Availability of information, support and services
There is a lack of mainstream support and services targeted at non-resident fathers to enable them to develop and maintain a beneficial relationship with their child.
Given the additional barriers that poor non-resident fathers may face, a multi-agency approach to service delivery is needed to meet their support and information needs, including those needs relating to parenting, counselling, employment and housing. Developing a more holistic approach to non-resident fathers would mesh well with current Government policy and practice on parenting support which recognises, more than ever before, the wide-reaching importance of the parenting role. This is evidenced in the second round of the allocation of the Government’s Parenting Fund monies which, acknowledging that the relationship between parents impacts on their parenting skills, encouraged applications for grants from projects able to address couple relationships.

Little research exists on the potentially different needs of non-resident fathers from different ethnic backgrounds. Further research is, therefore, needed to establish what these might be.

2.7.6. Availability and evaluation of services for non-resident parents

The range and availability of statutory and voluntary services supporting non-resident fathers in the UK and USA is limited. A broad typology would suggest services operate within the following areas, although there is obviously some crossover in function:

**Educational services**
These services generally aim to increase parents’ understanding of the effects of divorce and separation on their children, improve the co-parental relationship and reduce conflict.

**Legal and mediation services**
In the UK, services such as FAINS and mediation provided by the voluntary sector aim to facilitate the dissolution of relationships in ways which minimise distress to all parties and promote ongoing relationships and cooperative parenting. Mediation services aim to reduce the negative effects of separation on both partners and their children by helping the parents work towards mutual agreement on issues including finance, parenting and contact arrangements.

**Contact centres**
Contact centres provide a short-term service to facilitate contact between the non-resident parent and their child in a neutral, safe environment. Many centres provide supported contact in cases where parenting might be an issue or there is mistrust between the parents: staff keep a general eye on families and offer help where required. Others provide supervised contact in cases where there is concern over child safety or an assessment of contact is needed.

**Voluntary support and advice services**
Voluntary organisations offer a range of support and advice services through the internet, help lines, workshops and face-to-face sessions. The accessibility of organisations such as Parentline Plus means that they can offer support to groups who are less likely to engage with traditional family services.
Signposting services
Many virtual services, accessed through the internet, exist to promote and lobby for equal and shared parenting but also to signpost users to other services that may be of assistance.

Evaluation
Robust evaluations of services are scarce. Those that do exist have highlighted a number of areas in which effective practice is in place or ways in which it could be further developed. Findings and recommendations include the following points:

- There is a real need to provide information to separating parents on reducing adverse effects for children and their exposure to conflict. However, information should be coupled with the opportunity to develop skills, for example in negotiation techniques
- Parental support services, including those for non-resident fathers, need to convey the importance of being child-centred in decision-making
- There is a need to offer support to the parent as an adult, in addition to their role as a parent, for example, to help deal with the emotional distress that they may be experiencing due to the breakdown of the relationship
- The mode and delivery of services is important and needs to reflect the nature of the service offered and client needs. Some services saw the benefit of mixed-sex classes to give participants the opportunity to hear the other sex’s perspective. Others preferred to create a feeling of security by convening single-sex sessions
- Early intervention during the separation process was thought to be important before conflict had escalated
- Services need to recognise the unease some users might experience in early group sessions and address any concerns that feedback may be given to other parties and used against them
- The opportunity to access individual, as well as group, sessions, where information and support was tailored to personal circumstances, was often valued by parents
- Within mediation, it was felt important to offer both male and female mediators and those with the ability to speak other languages, in order to reach a wider clientele
- There is a need to publicise more widely the remit of services to both user groups and referral agencies. This would raise professional awareness of the services and help manage expectations of users.
3. SERVICE PROVISION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

3.1. Introduction

The purpose of this section of the report is to explore mainstream service providers’ awareness of the needs of separated families, and of non-resident parents in particular, the extent to which they feel their department can meet these needs, what hinders their provision of suitable services, and what, if anything, could be done to improve provision. Our focus is on mainstream services: housing, education, social/children’s services and Cafcass, as these are the ones which non-resident parents are most likely to encounter. Housing is of particular relevance to low-income separated parents as financial privations result in difficulties in finding suitable housing for both parents. For schools, the key issue is ensuring that both parents can be involved in their child’s education, as it has been shown that this is beneficial to child development. Children’s services are responsible in cases where there may be risks to the child. Cafcass plays a central role in contact and residence cases which are disputed in the family court.

Each statutory body has a different role, determined by both national legislation and local service configuration. As such, each is involved to varying degrees and in different situations with separating or separated families. Within each service type there is also a level of geographical variance. Local policy priorities, funding structures and administrative composition determine the breadth and quality of the service provided.

The following sections of this chapter of the report look at each service type in turn, drawing on interviews with a range of staff in the local authorities selected for the study, and exploring the policy context which dictates practice.

3.2. Housing

3.2.1. Introduction

The interviews focused on the views of staff at relatively senior levels in local housing departments, for example, Senior Advice Officer, Community Housing Manager, Principal Officer and Housing Options Manager. Their key areas of responsibility were housing allocation, housing strategy, homelessness, and advice and assistance with housing issues.

The local housing workers all recognised the importance of children maintaining contact with both parents where possible. They also demonstrated a reasonable, albeit varied, awareness of the specific needs of non-resident parents and their children, recognising that non-resident parents might require additional bedroom space to accommodate visiting children or housing near to where their child lived. However, most respondents rated their service as unable to cater well for such needs, the main obstacles being the scarcity of available housing stock weighed against high demand, and current regulations governing housing benefit. Respondents considered that more collaboration across services, better funding and small legislative changes could improve the situation.
3.2.2. Perception of needs

Respondents estimated that the proportion of low-income, non-resident parents who accessed housing services and expressed a desire to have contact with their children was about 10% of their entire caseload. In only one local authority were these statistics actually collected.

There was variance in the impression of non-resident parents’ needs across the different local authorities. While some departments felt that non-resident parents as a group presented few needs beyond those of single people: ‘They don’t seem to come up with any other…particular issues more than anyone else’ (Area 5) – others thought the reverse. The main identified need was for extra rooms in their allocated property to allow overnight contact with their children: ‘Well obviously … separated families want to have their children at weekends’ (Area 1). A second concern was that non-resident parents might want to be located near to the other parent’s home or to the school which the child attended, thus making contact easier.

Every Child Matters

All respondents acknowledged the value of children having meaningful contact with both their parents: ‘It’s advisable for all children to have access to all parents in an environment that’s accepted as home’ (Area 1). Half of the respondents considered the issue in terms of the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda, suggesting that maintaining a relationship with the non-resident parent is relevant to all five outcomes, but especially to ‘enjoying and achieving’. The remaining interviewees were unclear about the detail of the ECM agenda and its implications.

3.2.3. Service provision

All housing professionals interviewed ranked their service as either average or poor in its ability to cater for non-resident parents\(^2\). Indeed, the majority of respondents indicated that no extra consideration was given to non-resident parents over single people and that it was not within their remit to provide this. ‘They’re treated the same as everyone else. …our responsibility stops at a certain point.’ (Area 5).

There were, however, indications that some housing departments attempted to give non-resident parents additional rooms if they could:

> If ever possible and we feel that the need is there, if we can offer a two bedroomed accommodation to say a dad, dependable on what the circumstances are, in terms of visiting and access to the children, we do try. (Area 1)

Equally, some departments said that they would attempt to provide housing near to their child’s home. However, in both cases their ability to do so was very limited.

In all local authorities the housing department worked with numerous other agencies, including Sure Start, Children’s Services, social landlords and private sector estate agents. Respondents thought that non-resident parents were often more likely to find two bedroomed houses in the private sector.

\(^2\) Respondents were asked to place their service on a scale between 1 and 5, where 5 was high, in terms of its ability to cater for the needs of these groups.
Obstacles to service provision

Despite their awareness of the needs of separated families and non-resident parents, there were various obstacles preventing local housing departments from catering fully for them. The main obstacle was a lack of resources. Housing officers in local authorities where the department still held stock complained about the lack of housing compared with the high demand. Respondents indicated that good intentions were useless without the resources to follow them through:

We can change our policies all we want and we can do that accordingly to meet the needs of these people, but if we haven’t got the properties, we can’t give what we haven’t got…. I mean obviously we try our best to keep them near schools or to try and keep them near each other but it’s not always possible. (Area 1)

In those local authorities where housing benefit was conferred through subsidising the cost of privately rented property, the problem lay with the fact that their budgets and regulations did not allow them to fund larger homes for ostensibly ‘single’ tenants.

The lack of stock is blamed on ‘the right to buy scheme’, which has been continued by the Labour Government, despite their initial policy to overturn it during their period of opposition. The scheme has led to a massive reduction in the amount of housing available to local authorities over the past two decades, while at the same time housing departments lack funds to replenish this stock. One respondent pointed out that:

We’ve got such a huge lack of stock, since we had the introduction of right to buy… stock diminished from over six thousand properties to less than three thousand. And the majority of those that are left are one bedroom flats, which obviously aren’t suitable for families. (Area 1)

A further obstacle for non-resident parents is that they are afforded little priority by housing departments which use a points basis to determine who has the most need of housing. National legislation prescribes that certain groups should be given ‘reasonable preference’ in the allocation of housing, based on the urgency of their need. These categories include the emergency homeless, people living in substandard housing and people with certain health problems. In some local authorities, parents with non-resident, dependent children are allocated a small number of priority points, but this is not standardised practice throughout the country. Nationally there is no legal category for non-resident parents within the ‘reasonable preference’ framework.

Finally, since 1996 single people under the age of 25 have been in a separate band of housing benefit that is comparatively low. Under-25s who rent private property have their benefit restricted to the average cost of a single room in their area. In this context, ‘single’ means not having dependants living with you and thus includes young non-resident parents. For this reason, young non-resident parents on low incomes face an even harder task gaining access to adequate housing than their older counterparts.

3.2.4. What more could be done?

Several suggestions for improving the service to separated families were made by respondents. Some focused at the national level, while others focused on the departments themselves, or on local voluntary sector service providers. Indeed it was argued that better provision for separated families might engender a virtuous circle. A
greater focus on non-resident parents’ needs might lead to a drop in teenage homelessness caused by young people leaving home when the resident parent re-partnered. In Area 7, 11% of crisis housing applications came from 16 and 17 year-olds: if only a proportion of these could live with the other parent it would reduce the strain on the housing department.

Central Government
The key obstacles are a lack of resources and a lack of clear definition in the law. One professional argued that to alter the current state of affairs would require a change in legislation, namely that non-resident parents be made a category shown reasonable preference, but added that their services were stretched even without such a move. Equally, they felt that much more could be done if given the resources: ‘In an ideal world it’d be great to give a split household… both a two bedroom, they could share the access of the child …but that won’t happen.’ (Area 5)

Within the local authority
One professional indicated that more could be done within local authorities in terms of multi-agency work as part of wider agendas such as social regeneration or community stability. Indeed, most respondents thought that a multi-agency approach was the best way to address the needs of separated families, arguing that a combination of statutory and community services should be involved. Children’s services, education services, Sure Start, or social services, were mentioned as potential leaders.

While there was unanimous agreement that some form of training would be helpful to raise awareness of the specific issues of separated families on low incomes: ‘I think it would help giving just a wider understanding of the needs and difficulties of these people’ (Area 7) – this response was qualified by the view that the main problem was not awareness but insufficient resources. One professional remarked: ‘I don’t like to think about having services that just end up being a lip-service to somebody who’s in a real need’ (Area 1).

Voluntary sector
The majority of professionals recommended that better links with third sector organisations might improve the situation, some, as this respondent in Area 5, mentioning in particular a greater involvement of fathers’ groups; ‘Dads’ groups, they could help them access housing and give them the support they need.’ There was also the suggestion of establishing ‘housing surgeries’ to disseminate in the communities information about housing options and availability.

3.2.5. Summary
• Not all staff in local housing departments are aware of the needs of non-resident parents who wished to have overnight contact with their children
• Compared with competing groups such as the homeless and those in need of emergency housing, non-resident parents have a low priority, especially at central government level
• The situation is exacerbated by a chronic shortage of social housing. Respondents were unanimous in their view that the main obstacle to this issue being tackled is the lack of resources available to them
• Suggestions on possible steps that could be taken to improve service provision included more effective multi-agency working, and the introduction of a new legal category for non-resident parents at the national level.

• Several service providers suggested that while a greater awareness of the needs of this group might have some value, housing is not the appropriate department to take a lead in such matters.

3.3. Education

3.3.1. Introduction

Respondents included the head of an education welfare service, a principal education welfare officer, a manager of an attendance team, a principal education officer for behaviour and attendance, an area co-ordination manager, and an area manager of an education welfare service. Their key areas of responsibility were for school attendance, exclusions from schools, behavioural issues, engaging with parents and prosecuting them when required, and child protection within schools.

All those interviewed expressed their belief in the value of including both parents in the upbringing and education of their children where possible. They outlined a complex picture of the presenting needs of those who access their service. This involved the interrelation of problems at school, multiple deprivation, low aspirations, and family breakdown, including specific problems relating to reconstituted families. Each element was thought to be a contributing factor to children’s under-attainment and lack of engagement with education.

The interviews showed that education services were child-centred in their approach, with few formal arrangements for targeting non-resident parents. However, there was an understanding and appreciation of the importance of family structure among the staff, and an awareness that non-resident parents were often difficult to engage, or even to locate. Self-referrals for support were thought to be inhibited by the stigma attached to using the education welfare service.

Improvements were thought to be possible, with some respondents suggesting that central government policy has a key role in extending their remit to engage with parents proactively and others pointing to better multi-agency working as the route to more effective service provision.

3.3.2. Perception of needs

There was quite a wide variance in the proportion of each respondent’s caseload that dealt with children living apart from of their parents, but all agreed that it was quite a high proportion. In some areas the estimate was about 30 – 40%, in others it was 50% plus, whereas in one local authority the estimate was that around 95% of all cases involved single parent families. The majority of these cases also came from low-income groups.

Service users

The responses indicated that the most common problem faced by parents in contact with the education services is disconnection from education, epitomised by:
Low aspirations, disengagement from school at an early age, and really an inability to sort of engage with education establishments and official agencies in the best interests of their children. (Area 4)

This state of affairs is attributed in many instances to the parents' own attitudes towards formal education, such as ‘Where a parent or parents have themselves a poor history at school, or poor experience at school, that can be systemic in the family.’ (Area 1). This is explained as a recurring cycle that replicates across the generations, with many generations of the same family accessing services for similar reasons. One respondent commented:

*I worked as an education welfare officer for twenty-five years, and I'm now finding that the great grandchildren are coming through to the education welfare service.* (Area 7)

Other common difficulties include non-attendance of their children and behavioural problems at school.

Some respondents indicated that these problems might be more prevalent in separated families but that they came alongside other difficulties: ‘There probably is a higher correlation between, sort of, one-parent families and the whole host, of sort, of problems.’ (Area 2) In particular, attendance and behaviour were thought to be affected by parental separation, as the same respondent indicated:

*It definitely is the case that where we're dealing with non-attendance cases... it's highly common for one parent to be the main contact and for one parent to not be significantly engaged in it.* (Area 2)

In the case of behavioural problems, respondents argued that the impact of the separation itself and the animosity involved (rather than the absence of a parent) might be the critical factor: ‘If they've seen a split up at home, then obviously that will manifest itself very often in the child's behaviour at school.’ (Area 5).

Nevertheless, interviewees were keen to stress that while there might be a correlation between family separation and difficulties engaging with school, this was by no means always the case. It was felt that there were couples who struggled to provide adequate support to their children and single parents who managed extremely well, and the defining factor was parenting capacity. Some respondents refused to draw any connection between family configuration and problems at school; stating that the question was *such a political hot cake.* (Area 1).

Nevertheless, all respondents felt that children from separated families would benefit from extra consideration and support:

*I think that the more adult support and help that children get, whether it's within a traditional family structure or whether it's from an extended family, or indeed, you know, decent, reasonable, concerned adults, the better.* (Area 4)

There was also awareness among those interviewed about the specific needs of children whose parents were in the process of separating or had recently separated. The education officers indicated that support is routinely offered to children who are thought
to need it – ‘Certainly we’ve got our pastoral support system in schools to support the youngsters.’ (Area 5) – but that parents often did not inform the school of the family breakdown.

Low income
The demographic group thought to be most over-represented in terms of service use was white working-class boys:

In terms of the highest risk group in terms of non-attendance at school and disengagement from school are white, free-school-meal-entitled boys. (Area 2)

All respondents stated that low income could be a key variable in determining engagement and achievement at school, indicating that financial pressures were greater on separated families. Low income was seen as a contributing factor to problems such as overcrowded accommodation, which in turn has the effect of denying children the appropriate conditions to do homework. Equally, some low-income parents were thought to face various problems engaging with services, possibly because of the stigma associated with accessing support.

It was also thought that certain problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse and mental health issues, were more likely to be present among low-income parents, and these could result in both diminished capacity of the parents to care for their children and further financial privations: ‘Drugs, drink...leads onto mental health issues, that’s our biggest problem’ (Area 3).

Additional problems thought to be faced by low-income families included the expense and inconvenience of transporting children to school and the cost of providing the regulation equipment. One interviewee pointed to the:

Inordinate amount of pressure on low-income families in terms of just school uniform alone and all the equipment side of things that is demanded by schools. (Area 5)

All agreed that the combination of family separation and low income left many single mothers under considerable pressure, with housing, financial problems and insufficient support, with the result that ‘in one-parent families there is a greater need for support.’ (Area 4). Most respondents argued that these problems could be ameliorated to some extent by the involvement of the other parent and that it was the parents themselves who might need support in order to bring about greater improvements for the children: ‘Well if you want to make a lasting, sustainable impact on the kids then you’ve actually got to address some of the issues of the parents.’ (Area 4)

Non-resident parents
Throughout the interviews it was clear that the focus of education services was on the resident parent and the child rather than on the non-resident parent and their role. Nevertheless, all acknowledged that contact with non-resident parents was valuable for the child – ‘a father who’s not living with the child can often have a positive influence.’ (Area 3) – but responses were more mixed as to whether or how to support the non-resident parents. Some respondents indicated that more could be done to assist them,
suggesting that they should be kept informed both of how their child was faring and of their responsibilities to their child.

**Every Child Matters**
Most respondents had at least an understanding of the Every Child Matters agenda and commented that all the outcomes were relevant to children of separated families. However, one pointed out that ‘the five outcomes for the Every Child Matters are pertinent whether you’ve got two parents or one.’ (Area 1).

**Reconstituted families**
The introduction of a parent’s new partner into the family could change the situation for better or worse, the former when the new partner could provide support for the child and the latter when this caused the child to become physically or emotionally unsettled and led to a disruption is his/her education.

**3.3.3. Service provision**

**Quality and extent of service provision**
As indicated in the above section, the majority of respondents felt that priority was given to the needs of the child and the support of their resident parent rather than to the non-resident parent. Education officers believed that their service catered well for the needs of children, giving an average score of four out of five. Conversely, the response to how well the departments provided services for parents was around two out of five.

All the respondents said that their service was not specifically designed to target particular sorts of families let alone non-resident parents; ‘none of the services that I provide or manage are equipped to target single-parent families.’ (Area 2). However, they also indicated that family structure was taken into account as one factor relevant in their central focus on the child’s welfare.

The prevailing view was that contact with both parents was valuable but that legally they ‘can only work with the person within the family who has parental responsibility.’ (Area 7). Where parental responsibility existed and the non-resident parent was willing to engage, service providers would ‘give information to dads and invite them to parents’ evenings and the like.’ (Area 4). This is in keeping with the DCFS guidance for schools (2000) on the issue of parental responsibility and section 576 of the 1996 Education Act which focuses on the working definition of a parent. (http://www.dfes.gov.uk/circulars/dfeepub/jun00/050600/index.htm)

Other respondents suggested that they would seek to involve the non-resident parent in school matters unless there was some compelling reason, such as a court injunction, why they could not. ‘Unless there is an order precluding that contact between the separated parent and the children … that parent has an equal right to information.’ (Area 5). However, a contradictory view was that proactively engaging non-resident parents was not their job: ‘If that parent wants assistance, most parents know where to come to.’ (Area 7).

**Obstacles to service provision**
The practitioners interviewed outlined numerous obstacles to their effective provision of services to single-parent families, non-resident parents and their children. One
respondent pointed out that ‘the, one big disadvantage for single parents is if they’re working, they invariably can’t make meetings in school hours.’ (Area 1), though the problem applies to all parents in employment, not only those who are single.

Non-resident parents were often not traceable, or the parent with care did not wish for them to be involved and might refuse to provide information to the education workers:

*In many cases we always ask the mother about the father’s input if they’re separated and where is he? Can we contact him? Because he still has responsibilities. Very rarely do we get their contact details.* (Area 3)

Moreover, in some localities it was felt that non-resident parents were more likely to move residence frequently, making contact even more difficult for services.

*It is quite a difficult task. I mean, in this area particularly, the population is quite a transient population, so it is the mothers that tend to be the static base if you like. And the fathers do move around the authority quite a bit and so tracking them and engaging them is quite a difficult issue.* (Area 2)

Several respondents also highlighted the reluctance of many single parents to access support as they would not acknowledge that it was necessary. Again this relates to the stigma attached to support services in the eyes some people: ‘I think there’d be a difficulty in lone parents accepting that they need any additional support than if they were married.’ (Area 1). This point is borne out in one local authority where the rates of prosecution of single mothers for the non-attendance of their children had become such a problem that the local authority received funding for two support workers to help the parents. This pilot scheme was described as an ‘abysmal failure’ as ‘the parents didn’t want any support at all.’ (Area 7)

**Steps taken**

As previously indicated, there are a wide range of views on both the obligation and the capacity of education services to engage with non-resident parents. Some local authorities actively tried to involve this group, whereas others were more reluctant to do so. One respondent stated that;

*We constantly visit the estranged family if they have parental responsibility, asking if they can contribute to supporting their child’s education. We will write them into action plans; we’ll bring them into the schools.* (Area 1)

However, another indicated that they were less willing to take such measure: ‘We’re not social workers to be quite frank with you’ (Area 7).

Much of this variance was determined at local level. Local government policy was seen by all respondents to have a substantial impact on their capacity to provide services to the group in question, both in terms of service design and through the allocation of funds across all the local services:

*[Local policy] is critical because the way in which services are designed will determine how accessible they are to parents.* (Area 2) and ‘Ultimately it comes down to what you can afford here.’ (Area 7)
Correspondingly, most respondents felt that central government has a vital role to play in both their ability to provide for separated families and also in determining the remit of their services, through its allocation of resources for local government and setting the policy agenda nationally. This role is mentioned specifically in terms of Local Strategic Partnerships, and the ECM agenda, suggesting that these are centrally driven. Several respondents were enthusiastic about the underlying central government policy agenda ‘What it’s done, which I think is brilliant. It does really raise the profile of the importance of parenting and children.’ (Area 3) However, a greater number felt that both central and local government were more interested in child support and maintenance than father involvement. This is evidenced by the fact that much of central government action is punitive rather than supportive of struggling parents. Parents are now liable for fine of up to £2,500 if convicted of failing to ensure that a child aged between five and 16 years old attends school regularly, and in the most extreme cases parents can face custodial sentences. They can also be subject to smaller fines, administered by the school or local authority for similar failings, without recourse to the courts (http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/educationandlearning/rightsandresponsibilities/behaviourandattendanceyourresponsibilities/schoolattendanceyourresponsibilities/)

One respondent pointed out that since their work is dictated by central government, ‘It [central government] could, if it felt it appropriate, very easily target a specific focus on work with single parent families.’ (Area 2).

The education officers and managers listed numerous partners and collaborators on service provision, ranging from youth offending teams and social services, to health departments, psychological services and the police. Some professionals also indicated collaboration with more specialised services such as On Track, Youth Inclusion Support Projects, learning centres, Sure Start, Home Start, and certain charities that help with financial support, uniforms, equipment etc., such as the School Home Support.

In terms of multi-agency collaboration, the department most favoured for taking a lead in addressing the needs of children and parents from separated families was social services. One respondent remarked that:

> Whether that lead professional role is triggered by the youngster not attending, or whether it’s because of social services issues, I think whoever takes that role has the responsibility to identify who needs to be involved in that child’s situation. And if that’s an absent parent, then we must do our best to engage with them. (Area 5)

The best examples of service provision came from local authorities where the many relevant agencies and voluntary sector organisations coordinated their work. This prevented work being duplicated or contradictory measures being taken by different agencies. It also led to a higher level of service provision for the child. Many respondents suggested that non-statutory agencies such as charities and community groups had ‘a big role to play’ (Area 4) as they might be met with less wariness than mainstream statutory services.

**Changes being made**

For the most part, the responses indicated that locally no steps were planned in the near future to address the specific needs of separated families. Some respondents reported that they would reserve judgement on this matter until they were presented with
evidence to support such action, indicating that in some local authorities there was already a systematic analysis of need and priorities. One local authority was running a statistical diagnosis of its caseload to gain: ‘a greater awareness of, if you like, the epidemiology of our circumstances so that we can target services more effectively.’ (Area 2). In another instance (Area 4) there was mention that self-supporting parents’ groups were being set up and that these might be extended to provide specific support for non-resident parents.

3.3.4. What more could be done?

Provision of additional funding was essential to the implementation of suggestions about better support for and engagement with non-resident parents and their children. These included employing extra officers with the express role of canvassing opinion on the service to get better feedback: ‘We need to hear the people’s voices; well we need to do a piece of work to, to actually hear what children, people say, you know?’ (Area 3). Training around the problems confronting non-resident parents was considered to be potentially helpful, although varying levels of enthusiasm were expressed. In the local authority (Area 3) where almost the entire caseload focused on single parent families, the respondent said that ‘we’d send officers there, it’d be brilliant. … I think it’s very needed.’ However, other respondents were more lukewarm, suggesting that general training on the issues in different types of family composition might be more useful: ‘I think specific training probably no, but it, training which will enhance a worker’s sort of ability to handle a particular case, then yes.’ (Area 7).

3.3.5. Summary

- Education services were by no means oblivious to the needs of non-resident parents and their children. All thought that contact between parents and children is vital to successful education.
- Many problems faced by the families accessing their service were not held to be particular to separated families but rather were seen as part of the wider picture of multiple disadvantage.
- Most education professionals felt that they would try to engage with both parents of a child regardless of their marital/residence status, provided that both held parental responsibility.
- For practical and logistical reasons often the resident parent is the one in most regular communication.
- In engaging with parents, education officers face both cultural obstacles, through parents being unwilling to use their service, and practical obstacles, in not having current contact details for non-resident parents.
- All felt that improvements could be made through better collaboration with other agencies.

3.4. Social Services

3.4.1. Introduction

The respondents included an Assistant Director of Children’s Services, a Head of Children’s Services, and a Head of Children in Need. Areas of responsibility spanned the full remit of children’s services.
All respondents recognised the value of contact between a child and both parents, provided that this did not endanger the child in any way, either through the risk of abuse or because of acrimony between the parents. There was a high level of awareness about the issues relating to family breakdown within the service. However, in providing targeted support, interviewees mentioned the resistance they face from both the public and from the other statutory services, in which referral procedures sometimes overlook social services.

It was felt that many improvements could be made, such as more early intervention and closer work with other agencies, through local strategic partnerships.

### 3.4.2. Perception of needs

The interviewees were unable to give accurate figures on the proportion of their caseload that involved single-parent families or reconstituted families but all of them estimated the figure to be high. In particular, it was thought that children in separated families were over-represented on the child protection register:

> When we're looking at statistics in relation to children on the child protection register, that there's quite a high number of single mums who are the parents of those children. (Area 7)

Given the nature of the service, the most commonly presented needs of the parents and children in separated families were quite severe in comparison with the previous two services (housing and education). Social services departments were often called upon to provide support for young parents who struggle to manage alone or for those with a learning disability or mental health problems. This appeared to be a particular problem in some areas and was specifically mentioned by a respondent in Area 6.

Other reasons for coming into contact with a family included genuine concerns about the safety of the child, or 'when either parent is making allegations of abuse of some sort, whether it’s sexual abuse or physical abuse during contact' (Area 7). Services would also become involved in a case if a child started displaying difficult behaviour in school or was known to be using drugs.

Most respondents were keen to make clear that these problems were not only found in separated families. As one professional explained:

> The needs of the children are no different in terms of the two groups [single-parent families and intact families]; they still have a need for support to achieve their life chances in relation to education and health and identity and all the rest of it, emotional behavioural development and so on. (Area 7)

### Every Child Matters

Similarly, it was felt unanimously that all five outcomes of the ECM agenda were relevant to children from separated families, but no more so than to children in all types of family. The difference was thought to be in the amount of support that children from separated families might need to achieve the same levels of development in factors such as their identity, confidence, mental health, achievement, behaviour, and life chances.
3.4.3. Service provision

Steps currently being taken
All respondents stated that once a case was referred to them, they did take into account the child’s family structure, but only as one factor in their assessment process. If the child was not living with one of the parents, then the focus would be primarily on establishing the role that the non-resident parent did or could play in parenting. All respondents indicated that they provided a ‘child-centred service’ in which the parents were only as important in terms of their value to the child. When asked to place the focus and quality of their service provision on a scale, one respondent exemplified this position by indicating that the score he would give the department for their support of non-resident parents ‘depends on the needs of the child’. (Area 7).

In terms of encouraging or facilitating contact with the non-resident parent potentially against the wishes of the child or the parent with care, responses were mixed. Most of the respondents indicated that they would not attempt to impose contact if the child did not want it, unless there was a court ruling saying that there must be contact as ‘it is critical to consider the wishes and feelings of a child.’ (Area 5). However, most answers suggested that if the main obstacle to contact was the feelings of the resident parent, and there was no history of abuse, then they would encourage the resident parent to consider the best interests of the child: ‘we would obviously try and persuade them that it was in the children’s best interests to see the partner.’ (Area 7).

There was a wide variation in responses to the question of how each service worked with other organisations to provide for the needs of non-resident parents. One indicated that there were few formal arrangements but that there were ‘practitioner relationships’ (Area 7) at ground level, with departments such as health, education, police, and youth offending, but that the connections were ‘very piecemeal’. Another indicated the reverse, with many measures in place to coordinate service provision:

   We have what are called consortia, which have been those district-based, multi-agency – including the voluntary sector – partnerships to support local development, obviously in line with legislation. (Area 5)

This is in reference to government initiatives to create Local Strategic Partnerships, set out in the guidance document of 2001 (http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=187).

None of the departments provided specific training for their staff on the needs of non-resident parents although they all provide training focused on family history and family dynamics so that learning about non-resident parents is covered.

Central government policy was understood by all to be the most important factor: currently, the relevant legislation is set out in the 1989 Children Act, which stipulates that children’s services must help children to have contact with all members of their family: ‘It’s completely bounded by the child care legislation to which we work.’ (Area 5) However, even here there are no specific rules about non-resident parents: ‘whether or not a family is separated is, is only part of the picture for us.’ (Area 5). Local government, by comparison, was thought to be of less centrality. Local policy was considered to have some impact on a department’s ability to cater for the needs of separated families, in that some local policy decisions would impact on funding for
projects addressing these families. There were no current plans to take action specifically on non-resident parents.

Obstacles to service provision

Various impediments to families using children’s services were put forward, the majority of which were not seen as specific to either low-income or separated families. The mostly frequently mentioned problem in respect of non-resident parents was contact with them. Sometimes contact with the non-resident parent might be obstructed by the resident parent, but in other cases, it was felt, non-resident parents did not want to be involved with their children and consequently avoided being traced: ‘People sometimes just literally move to the, you know, parts of the country where you can’t get them’. (Area 6)

Wider-ranging problems included the fact that children’s services are a specialist agency which families would not use for general support when other organisations were better placed to provide this. Furthermore, there is a stigma attached to receiving input from social services, even more so than with education support services. For many families, the presence of a social worker from a statutory agency is indicative of parental failure. Additionally, children’s services are generally viewed as a punitive, not a supportive organisation, with the result that ‘there is generally a fear amongst a lot of parents that if we get involved then we’re a threat in terms of removing the children.’ (Area 7)

Finally, there was a notion in one or two local authorities that some statutory bodies, such as the police and health departments, were unwilling to refer cases to social services, even when this was dictated by protocols signed by their departments. The reason given was that workers feared that social services’ involvement might have a negative effect on their working relationship with a family.

3.4.4. What more could be done?

All respondents suggested measures which could be taken to improve their services, though not aimed specifically at non-resident parents. One mentioned that their team was looking to move towards a very comprehensive needs assessment mapping system that would allow them to focus resources on those most in need. This is as part of a local authority-wide collaboration of all relevant services to build a comprehensive plan that covers service provision to children and young people, ranging from leisure activities through to children in need. This move is in line with the requirements for all local authorities to have in place a Children and Young People’s Plan (CYPP) by 2010. (http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/strategy/planningandcommissioning/cypp/)

Another interviewee suggested that their department could do more to facilitate other groups in offering ‘community provision’, i.e. more universal services in addition to the specialist services provided by themselves. There was also a suggestion that children’s services could get involved in cases before they were legally required to, perhaps offering mediation or facilitating contact. Often children’s services are approached for help in establishing contact arrangements but this is outside their remit, as one respondent indicated: ‘We do get requests for supervising contacts or organising contact because people won’t speak to each other. …We can’t help either, I think that’s a gap’ (Area 7).
Some of the respondents said that their departments did have plans for further action to engage with separated families, but these were always in the context of the children’s needs.

A number of our strategic plans look at how we will support the communities or, or for individual cases specifically what our intervention might need to be to enable the child to continue to know their family. Whether that’s through enabling contact or managing safety plans for example. And that continues to build on the raft of work that we’ve already got in place. (Area 5)

One suggestion of how to overcome the obstacle of stigmatisation was to try and promote social services more effectively, informing the public of the range of services they provide and which might be accessed, but this was followed with the comment that, ‘It’s difficult in the middle of it all to market social services!’ (Area 6). To combat the lack of understanding within other statutory services of what children’s services do, one respondent suggested that teaching other organisations about the work the of children’s services might well improve cooperation. It was also thought to be beneficial to teach workers from other organisations about the relevance of family structure to their own specialist fields, one interviewee pointing out that ‘in the delivery of a service, all organisations need to take account of the family organisation of a child, which includes not only those with parental responsibility.’ (Area 5).

All of these measures would entail better cooperation between services to the extent of developing a unified ‘family support strategy’, thus improving referrals procedures. This would allow more communication, improve the efficiency and efficacy of service provision, and take some of the weight from statutory social services.

We would be looking to try and develop services alongside other local authority departments, maybe other agencies, in terms of being able to maybe get them to assess the needs and see what they can provide rather than come to us. (Area 7)

When asked which service should take the lead on the question of separated families, all responses pointed to a cooperative effort within an overall strategy rather than to any specific organisation taking responsibility.

Most respondents thought that understanding how different family types functioned was extremely valuable and that training on family structure would be beneficial but that a specific focus on separated families might be unnecessary. This view is encapsulated in the comment of one respondent who stated that:

I don’t think it ever does any harm to refresh on those sorts of issues, because there is a danger of only talking to mum or writing dad off as a dead loss or whatever, far too readily sometimes. (But) I’m not sure that it needs to be a separate focus. (Area 7).

3.4.5. Summary

- Children’s services staff see non-resident parents not in isolation, but as one part of a wider picture which centres on the child’s needs.
- All respondents did acknowledge the importance of a child having contact with family members
• They would encourage contact with non-resident parents, unless this was against the child’s wishes or contravened a court order
• Their ability to address these issues is limited by the fact that they are a specialist service that deals with families in crisis and hence are not the main player in the scenario of family separation
• Stigma attached to using the service also inhibits providers’ ability to offer support
• Improvements could be made to the way children’s services work with other agencies. This might involve an enhanced capability to spot problems early and intervene swiftly.

3.5. Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass)

3.5.1. Introduction

_Cafcass takes the view that children need to maintain relationships with both their parents unless there is serious and compelling reason for that not to take place._ (Area 5)

Cafcass is a non-departmental public body independent of the courts, social services, education and health authorities and all similar agencies. Its remit is to:

• safeguard and promote the welfare of children
• give advice to the family courts
• make provision for children to be represented
• provide information, advice and support to children and their families.

The work of Cafcass is split between public law, when social services have become involved and children may be removed from their parents’ care for their safety, and private law, when parents or carers are separating or divorcing and have not reached agreement about arrangements for their children. Like children’s services, they are predominantly concerned with the welfare of the child and do not target non-resident parents specifically.

Interviews were conducted with workers engaged in private law in both Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru, which have become largely separate organisations since devolution of the latter to the Welsh Assembly Government, to the advantage of the workers in Wales. One worker in Wales commented that, “I was on training once with some colleagues from London, and it’s horrendous how they have to work.” (Area 7).

The interviewed Cafcass personnel indicated a complete understanding of issues relating to family separation, noting that for non-resident parents the massive priority was contact with their children. Consequently, one urgent need for this group was swift and decisive court proceedings, which many felt were unlikely to happen:

_The legal process can be very long and frustrating to parents who are being denied contact… the court process can be very frustrating, it’s long-winded._ (Area 7)
The respondents outlined several factors which inhibited their effective provision. Most notable was a high level of acrimony, often entrenched, between the parents. The most common factor in being denied contact was a poor relationship with the other parent. Additionally, many respondents noted a recent increase in the number of parents representing themselves in court cases as a result of restrictions in legal aid and the expense of lawyers. They also referred to uncooperative statutory services and unrealistic expectations of their users.

Suggestions about how things could be improved to cater better for separating or separated families included more resources and better funding for local contact centres (especially in England) as well as a wider remit to engage with parents earlier and, possibly, help them diffuse animosity before it led to a court hearing.

3.5.2. Perception of needs

Interviews were conducted with service managers, a Head of Service and an Area Director of regional offices. Their collective responsibilities span the entire remit of Cafcass, ranging from first contact with families to follow-up after court cases.

Cafcass, more than any other statutory service, is involved with parental separation and the associated issues of disputed contact or residence. First contact with non-resident parents is often when they are trying to gain or re-gain contact with a child. The most common problem was thought to be contact with the child being denied by the parent with care, either because of unresolved issues resulting from relationship breakdown or because of concerns over the non-resident parent’s ability to care for the child. The issue is, according to one respondent, ‘the readiness of the parent that has residence to accept that the other parent has a significant role to play in the child’s life’ (Area 1).

Concerns often arise, from the parent with care or from the courts, over the ability of the non-resident parent to look after the child adequately, especially if there has been a long period without any contact and the child is young and needs to have a routine in place. The underlying cause of these problems is often animosity between the parents: ‘I think the mothers do have a negative attitude towards the father of their children if their relationship breakdown has been particularly acrimonious.’ (Area 8) Moreover, entrenched cases with a high level of animosity between the parents can take a long time to resolve, or might not be resolved at all. Often the situation is exacerbated if contact and residence applications coincide with the ancillary applications.

A major obstacle to contact emerges when relations between the two parents are considered to have deteriorated to such an extent that the court decides that the relationship between the parents is too poisonous to risk contact. Indeed, problems with the parent with care sometimes cause the non-resident parent not to pursue contact because, as they see it, it is against the best interests of the child.

A child who is old enough and competent enough to express his/her own views has the right to refuse contact. This scenario is thought to be complicated as the resident parent has the means to influence the child’s view of the non-resident parent, should she or he wish to do so.

A classic response is that the child does not wish to see the non-resident parent. That may be because there has been pressure brought to bear on that child, it
may be influences from a new partner, it may be a genuine and serious view from a child that they may not like the parent they don't live with. (Area 5)

Reconstructed families
From conversations with Cafcass officers it emerged that there is a constellation of issues that relate specifically to situations where one or both of the parents have re-partnered. While respondents could only provide estimates of the proportion of their caseload which was accounted for by such cases, all indicated that it was a significant amount, with one estimating it at about one third.

It's surprising how often immediately after a separation contact between the non-resident parent and a child is okay, but as soon as that person develops another relationship, it's surprising how often problems then start. (Area 8).

The main complication in these situations was thought to be the division in the new family unit at the weekend when the children (or some of them) had contact with the non-resident parent and ‘you have to separate the children to go off with dad and they’re missing out on other activities.’ (Area 2). This can present problems for the parent with care who is attempting to establish a cohesive family, and can result in tensions between the children. It also becomes a problem for children when they are given a choice of whom to spend their time with, which is ‘very difficult for children because of their loyalty to both parents and their siblings.’ (Area 2).

Children who have grown up with a parent who is not their birth parent can be denied contact with him/her and the non-biological parent of the child is left in a position where he/she has no legal recourse. Finally, children may find it difficult to understand their relationship to the non-resident parent’s new partner, or they might feel excluded by the presence of new children in the family or the choice of a parent to live with a new family.

However, one respondent was keen to point out that these problems can exist even without new children being a factor:

It’s not only a question of when they’ve got children, it’s …when one partner becomes aware that their former partner has now developed a relationship, (that) can be problematic. (Area 8)

Furthermore, all respondents pointed out that, while often the new family member can cause a problem for children, this is not always the case, and that if all parties are cooperative, the additional adult support for the children could be beneficial.

Every Child Matters
The Every Child Matters agenda has not been formally adopted in Wales and Cafcass Cymru staff use it only as a reference document. One respondent explained:

We are certainly being more selective about those elements of it which we find interesting than, than England has… Every Child Matters as a policy document has never been part of Cafcass Cymru policy. (Area 8)

All five outcomes of the agenda were thought to be relevant to separated families, though economic well-being was highlighted, as parental separation seriously impacts on the amount of resources available in low-income families.
One respondent described the relevance of staying safe to separating and separated families as ‘huge’, since many children do not meet the threshold for ‘emotional abuse’ but suffer greatly as a result of arguments between parents. This consideration is also relevant to the emotional well-being outcome, as ‘being stuck between two parents in conflict is a real struggle for children.’ (Area 1)

3.5.3. Service provision

Cafcass staff become involved with a family as a result of an application for a court hearing in respect of residence or contact. Other, less common, circumstances are a request for a prohibited steps order\(^3\) or an application for a variation of an existing order. As one respondent openly acknowledged, ‘there isn’t a lot of services out of there for the non-resident parent.’ (Area 7)

The period of time that Cafcass staff work with a particular family varies widely depending on the nature and circumstances of the individual case and its location: staffing issues and the number of cases in an area cause considerable variation in waiting times. However, the guidelines suggest that certain steps should be taken immediately on the allocation of the case. As soon as a case is referred, Cafcass must run a safety check on the family to discover if they are known to other statutory services, and whether there are issues that might put the child at risk.

Many Cafcass offices now attempt to resolve disputes initially through mediation, but if this is unsuccessful then the court will request a full Section 7 Report that looks in depth at the family situation and involves interviews with all relevant parties and background checks. This process should take between 10 and 12 weeks, though in some areas with heavy caseload and staff shortages it can take much longer. The length of time it takes to produce the report can have various effects on the situation. Parents may be able to discuss and resolve their dispute without recourse to court proceedings. Alternatively, adversarial positions may become more entrenched. Other risks are that the parent with care might try to move, or to change the child’s school, which could lead to an application by the other parent for an interim court order.

Since devolution, Cafcass Cymru receives its funding from the Welsh Assembly Government, and this is more generous than that received by its English counterpart. Consequently, staff shortages are less common, waiting times are shorter and reports are compiled more speedily. In this sense central government policy is a dividing factor. Cafcass Cymru also benefits from being apparently better integrated into a multi-agency approach, local safeguarding boards, court users’ meetings and the family court justice service.

By comparison, staff in the English offices indicated that local government policy had little impact on their operation but that, in contrast, ‘\textit{national policy is a massive driver.’} (Area 1).

\(^3\) An order made by a court to prevent certain actions being taken without the court’s consent. A prohibited steps order can be made to prevent a child or children being taken abroad on holiday by one of their parents. This is done in circumstances where there is a custody dispute and there is a perceived risk that the parent will not return with the child or children.
Working with families

The role of Cafcass involves working with the parents and children to determine what is in the best interests of the child and encouraging parents to put these first. Traditionally, this has led to series of interviews with all relevant parties and writing reports for the courts. In extreme cases, the child has his/her own representative in cases which proceed to court.

However the procedure is currently shifting from a reporting role to one where they work more with the families to resolve disputes, as one respondent explained: ‘Primarily our role in private law proceedings is one of reporting on what's happening. It's changing to being one where we work with the families more, so we're in a fairly transition period.’ (Area 1)

Obstacles to service provision

Only a small proportion, estimated to be about 10%, of private law disputes over contact and residence are resolved by means of a court hearing, but these are likely to bear the hallmarks of a high level of acrimony. This situation is often marked by the parents’ inability to take the best interests of the child into account. As a respondent pointed out: ‘if people are entrenched, they don't see the needs of that child.' (Area 7). Lack of communication between the parents is seen as the main factor leading to this situation.

Recent years have seen the eligibility criteria for legal aid become increasingly stringent and the result for Cafcass staff is that ‘what we're worried about is more and more families representing themselves during procedures.’ (Area 2). Staff are concerned that such parents lack the legal knowledge needed and thus lose out in the case.

Another obstacle which emerged through interviews is the problem caused by what Cafcass workers see as unreasonable expectations of the service, leading to disappointment and resentment:

Because we’re often the first service involved, their expectations of what we can provide don't always match to the reality of what we can provide. (Area 2).

One respondent indicated that this results in a kind of scapegoating; ‘We're the soft underbelly of the system in a lot of ways, and we're the ones always left with the complaints.' (Area 8).

There is a considerable variation between areas in the extent to which Cafcass works in partnership with other organisations. Some offices have many links with other organisations, while others are relatively isolated. Of the other organisations named as partners or collaborators the most common were:

- Safeguarding Children Boards
- Social services
- Contact centres
- Schools
- Police
- Private or voluntary sector organisations that provide parenting-skills services.
All respondents indicated that some agencies are not as co-operative as they could be in supporting non-resident parents, the most frequently mentioned being local housing departments.

_We may have a non-resident parent say, ‘I can’t have overnight stays cos I haven’t got the appropriate space.’ There’s nothing wrong with us writing a letter of support saying, ‘it would assist this parent if you would consider him having additional accommodation on the basis that he can’t have overnight staying contact because of the housing crisis,’ but it probably falls on deaf ears, to be honest._ (Area 7)

Sure Start was also highlighted for failing to engage with non-resident parents, although it was acknowledged that it was somewhat restricted by its remit, which was seen as focusing on resident parents.

The NHS was seen as not always being as helpful as it might be, especially because it seemingly failed to recognise the benefits of closer collaboration: _‘I think the service that maybe everyone needs to work upon is the health visitors’ service. They’re not always very cooperative.’_ (Area 7).

### 3.5.4. What more could be done?

It was unanimously felt that improvements could be made to the way that Cafcass provided its service. In England one of the key recommendations was for more resources, including more staff.

Several respondents pointed to the critical factor of time. It was felt that the longer the problems within a family went unaddressed, the more difficult it became to resolve them: _‘by time we get the case, they’re entrenched because they’ve spent years arguing. The judiciary is quite a slow process.’_ (Area 7). This has led to requests to undertake early intervention work before the parents’ positions become intractable; _‘The earlier we can intervene in the court process the better because the court process, I think, ends up being very adversarial.’_ (Area 1). This suggests a radical change, as currently the manner in and stage at which Cafcass can engage with a family is strictly determined.

_It’s taking us out of that remit. But we think in the long term it would have an impact on the amount of children who go through the Court system. If it reduces that, then it would be a benefit, but it also needs funding and at the moment we’re not remitted to do that work... (Area 2)_

_The problem now is we don’t have the resources. If somebody’s to phone us up and say ‘I’m stuck with my family, what we can do?’ our current system is ‘Well I’m very sorry you have to go to court.’ We don’t have a sort of, an open door that says ‘Come on, you can talk about it.’ And I think that’s where we need to sort of look at what service we’re providing._ (Area 1)

In the same vein, some practitioners felt that early intervention might extend to a greater focus on family conferencing and mediation, to lessen the reliance on courts. It was thought that often disputes are worked through better without legal intervention. While in-court conciliation is already part of Cafcass provision, several respondents felt that
moving to out-of-court mediation, with no solicitors and with more commitment of time and resources, could yield more effective results.

In terms of the public's unrealistic expectations, some respondents suggested an improved approach to informing the public about what Cafcass does and what other services are open to them. When they first meet with parents, it is important for Cafcass workers to explain precisely what they do in order to avoid subsequent disappointment at what was achieved or accusations of bias. This could be tied in with obtaining better feedback from service users.

In many areas there was a call for more contact centres to supervise non-resident parents’ meetings with the child when this was considered advisable or was required by the court. The vast majority of contact centres are run by the voluntary sector and are thus determined by their capacity and priorities, resulting in some areas having very low availability. Lack of adequate and stable funding often caused the life-span of a contact centre to be quite short:

A lot of the contact centres, as in supervised contact centres, have diminished over the years and new ones have sprung up. So we have a few, but there isn’t enough. They’ll all struggling with funding. (Area 2)

Statutory provision or mainstream funding for voluntary agencies would overcome this. Similarly, some respondents felt that the provision of parenting courses for non-resident parents would help overcome some of the difficulties faced by non-resident parents who had not seen their children for some time and needed support in understanding how they had developed in the interim. This could also help alleviate the anxieties of resident parents who believed the parent who had been absent (not always willingly) to be incapable of caring for the child.

Few respondents expressed a view on which organisation(s) should take a lead on the issue of separated families and non-resident parents, but one indicated that they thought that voluntary and private sector agencies had a large role to play.

Specific training was not seen as necessary. Cafcass officers indicated that all workers are qualified social workers with at least three years' experience, and ‘most practitioners now within Cafcass have come from a childcare background.’ (Area 7). In addition they receive training on contact issues, dispute resolution, interviewing children, family background, family dynamics, risk assessment and issues of abuse, and introductions to new legislation. There was scepticism about training focused specifically on non-resident parents. It was felt that in a child-focused organisation, the majority of training should be directed towards children: ‘If anything they need the training to look at the children, not the.. [parents].’ (Area 8). However, in as much as the tensions between parents are detrimental to the child’s welfare, respondents thought that training around mediation might be more useful. As one respondent stated:

They would benefit from going on the dispute resolution training or looking at the impact of family conflict rather than narrowing it down to one particular part of the family. (Area 1)

A final factor that might feed into better outcomes in court battles is a re-assessment of the criteria for receiving legal aid. It was thought that some middle-to-low-income non-
resident parents, who did not qualify for legal aid, were being forced to manage without legal representation, leading to less fair outcomes in court.

3.5.5. Summary

- By nature of their work, there is awareness among Cafcass staff of all the issues relating to family separation.
- Though they understand the situation of the non-resident parent in family disputes, their main focus is on the welfare of the child(ren).
- It was recognised that children are sometimes prevented from having contact with their non-resident parent through the actions of the parent with care.
- Parents denied contact are not well served by the legal process for resolving disputes. The length of the process prolongs the period without contact and can lead to an enforcement of the status quo if this is deemed to be in the best interests of the child.
- It was felt that expansion of the early intervention approach through mediation might prevent many cases progressing to the family court.
- More contact centres, with secure funding, are needed to enable non-resident parents to have contact with their children in a safe setting. This is particularly pressing in cases where supervised contact is ordered by the court, as a long wait for a place at a centre can jeopardise the chances of contact being successfully re-instated.
- Parenting courses for non-resident parents, provided either by Cafcass or another agency, would benefit the child and both parents.

3.5.6. The Police

It was not the stated remit of this research to examine the role of the police in family matters of this type. However, towards the end of the data collection period, we were approached by a detective sergeant based in the central referral unit (dealing with child abuse cases) in a police force covering Area 6 who had conducted some research which was thought to be relevant. With the permission of the Chief Constable, the research team was allowed access to the findings of the research.

The detective sergeant had observed that over the weekends a relatively large number of calls which contained allegations of child abuse involved separated families. Subsequent analysis revealed that a negligible number of these entailed criminal issues, but because each case had to be investigated, the children were often unnecessarily subjected to the child abuse investigation process, which at times entailed interviews and medical examinations.

Concerns about the potential damage thus unnecessarily caused to children led to the setting up of the Residency Project – research which monitored the calls over a 12-month period by tagging those which involved a separated family and/or disputed residence or contact. The objective was to present and discuss the outcome at a local Safeguarding Children Board meeting with a view to developing strategies with partner agencies to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to the police and reduce the number of children inappropriately exposed to the child abuse investigation system.
During the 12-month period the unit received 2,069 referrals. Of these, 154 (7%) were identified as ‘residency cases’, and 49% of these were received over the weekend period, with the balance reported early in the week. Of the 154 cases, only 35 (22%) were graded as ‘B’ i.e. requiring action from the child abuse investigation unit: year on year statistics showed that of the total number of child abuse referrals received by this police force, approximately 50% are ‘Grade B’.

Following further investigation, only one of these 35 cases led to a criminal charge. This particular case was awaiting trial with the defendant pleading ‘Not guilty’.

From this brief snapshot it can be seen that a reasonable amount of the child abuse detective officers’ workload is related to ‘residency issues’. After investigation, most cases appear to be inappropriately or unnecessarily reported. This supports the theory that the children involved in these processes are needlessly subjected to involvement with police and child protection units and processes.

As reporting is usually at weekends, the assumption is that these referrals are tied into anxieties, real or imagined, of either parent about the welfare of the child. As no support services are available at this time, the police are the only known available point of contact for families in this situation. The local duty solicitor scheme does not cover issues concerning contact and residence. The National Centre for Domestic Violence offers a 24-hour telephone helpline but this only offers advice in respect of violence and injunctions. The recommendation of the police is that there is a strong case for consideration of multi-agency service provision being available over weekend and holiday periods so that families, and in particular children, caught up in these situations are not subject of the criminal justice process, which in itself could be considered abusive.

3.6. Common findings among the services

While there is variation between services in terms of their understanding and prioritisation of the needs of separated families, and in particular non-resident parents, there is also some commonality in their responses.

The findings suggest that all the services recognise the value of both parents having a meaningful role in their children’s life, but also that family separation often entails animosity between the parents which can be harmful to their children. There was particular note paid to the additional pitfalls of separated parents who established new relationships. Equally, low income was seen as a major factor, often contributing to worse outcomes for children.

Animosity between parents was thought to be one of main obstacles to providing services to this group. In addition, non-resident parents present various problems as a group in terms of their lack of contact with mainstream services and reticence to become involved. Another common theme was the call for more resources and the need for a widening of each service’s remit as set out in legislation and policy so that they could address more comprehensively the needs of separated families. This might entail improved multi-agency working and earlier identification of and intervention in problems.
3.6.1. Perceptions of need

- All services recognised the value for children in maintaining contact with both parents, unless this placed them at risk. They also noted that support for these parents would be beneficial for all.

- Conversely, none of the providers felt that they were well placed to target services specifically towards non-resident parents, even though they might form part of their wider consideration for separated families. In some instances, respondents questioned whether this was within their remit.

- Many respondents felt that an exclusive focus on non-resident parents was unhelpful and that issues relating to the family configuration of children should be addressed in a more holistic manner.

3.6.2. Problems for the families

- Respondents recognised that family separation often entails a certain level of acrimony between the parents which can be harmful to all involved, especially the children.

- A new relationship for a separated parent was seen as a complicating factor in this context, creating new and different hurdles to overcome. This might result from renewed inter-parental resentment or torn loyalties for the child or indeed jealousy and unhappiness on behalf of the child in response to new family members.

- Low income was seen as another complicating factor, which both results from and contributes to family problems and exacerbates issues of housing, education and child welfare.

3.6.3. Obstacles to service provision

- Animosity between parents was thought to be one of main obstacles to providing services to this group. This is intensified if the resident parent resists attempts to involve the non-resident parent in the child’s care and upbringing.

- Non-resident parents were thought to be a so-called ‘hard to reach’ group. This is attributed in some instances to their desire to be uninvolved, and in others to the desire of their former partners for them not to be involved.

- In services which were not specifically child-focused, lack of resources was mentioned frequently as a factor that inhibited their more proactive engagement with the problems faced by separated parents.

- Some respondents expressed the view that, out of fear of being classed as a failure, separating and separated parents were unwilling to access support until problems became severe. In the case of social services this was complemented with fear about where their involvement might lead.

- Many respondents pointed to an absence of collaboration and information sharing by other services.

3.6.4. Suggestions for improvement

- Respondents in general saw multi-agency working as a priority in improving provision, by eliminating gaps and providing a more targeted and comprehensive service for separated families.
• Very few respondents thought that training specifically focused on non-resident parents would be worthwhile. Separation and family structure were thought to be more relevant targets for additional training.

• Early identification and intervention in family problems could prevent disputes becoming entrenched and reduce the financial and emotional costs.

• As always in studies of service provision, insufficient resources were identified as a major obstacle to better support for service users.
4. THE REALITY FOR FAMILIES

4.1. Introduction

The overall aim of the research was to develop an understanding of how the needs of disadvantaged children in separated families could best be met, and in particular to shed light on how mainstream services could facilitate the role of non-resident parents in meeting those needs. While the previous section looked at service providers’ views of what those needs were and whether they could be met, this section of the report explores the issues from the perspectives of non-resident parents, resident parents and children between the ages of seven and 16.

The information is drawn from qualitative, in-depth interviews conducted with 51 individuals from separated families in seven UK locations, selected from local authorities containing wards with Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) scores in the bottom quartile (25%) of the distribution for England and Wales as a whole. From this sample, interviews took place with 10 complete ‘sets’ of families (each consisting of a child, their resident and non-resident parent) and three partial family groups where it was only possible to interview the child and one parent (either resident or non-resident). A further 11 interviews took place where only one family member was available for interview. In total, 17 interviews with children from separated families took place, 18 with non-resident parents and 16 with resident parents.

To allow for a clear comparison of divergent perspectives, the needs of the non-resident parent, the resident parent and the children are examined separately (section 3.2). In this section, the direct quotes from respondents, which contain a substantial amount of personal information, are not attributed to individuals in order to preserve respondents’ anonymity. When examining the views of service provision from those families interviewed (section 3.3), the perceptions of both non-resident and resident parents and their children are triangulated. This is to avoid relying solely on the viewpoint of one of the parents and/or the child, which might give a distorted picture of the needs of the family as a whole. Direct quotes in this section, which are not so personal in nature, are attributed to the area in which respondents lived.

4.1.1. Outline of family scenarios

A broad range of situations encompasses these families, but trends emerged in terms of the type of scenario that characterised each situation. Five main scenarios emerged: dual families where there was a mutually supportive relationship between separated parents and where childcare was shared; positive co-parenting families; civil but unfriendly parents; acrimonious parents, where the relationship between separated parties was extremely hostile; and cases in which domestic violence had occurred or been alleged.

In dual families contact was shared almost equally between both separated parents and the child felt equally content staying with either their mother or father. The child spent a considerable proportion of time with their non-resident parent and contact was often flexible and spontaneous. The child felt fully integrated into both families and had very close relationships with extended family members on both sides. Parenting
responsibilities were shared almost equally between both separated parents, and communication was very good and mutually supportive.

With **positive co-parenting** the child spent more time with their resident parent, but contact with the non-resident parent was frequent and regular but more systematic than in dual families. Though the child had a good relationship with the extended family of the non-resident parent, they felt slightly closer to the family of their resident parent. The resident parent tended to have more parental responsibility, but key decisions about education, parenting methods and discipline were jointly shared and communication was good. As in the former cases of dual parenting, co-parenting had come about through an amicable separation or because the parents had developed a more positive relationship over time.

With **civil but unfriendly parents**, contact tended to be very formal and often the result of legal agreements and court orders. A significant amount of the child’s time was spent with the resident parent, but contact with the non-resident parent was regular. The child did not necessarily feel fully integrated into the life and family of the non-resident parent. The majority of parenting decisions were taken by the resident parent, including key decisions about education, parenting methods and discipline. The communication between the parents was unfriendly but polite and often avoided. The largest proportion of families in the study were in this group.

Where parents had an **acrimonious** relationship, contact was irregular and the child often experienced gaps in contact. The majority of the child’s time was spent with the resident parent and contact with the non-resident parent was sporadic and subject to change. The child felt detached and uninvolved with the family and life of the non-resident parent. All parenting responsibility was taken by the resident parent and the non-resident parent had limited input into key parenting decisions. The communication and relationship between separated parties was hostile.

**Domestic violence** was reported by either the resident parent or children. The violence was primarily targeted towards the resident parent by their former partner. Contact between the child and their non-resident parent had either completely stopped or was extremely limited. The children were often emotionally damaged and were experiencing mental health difficulties. There was no communication between the separated parties and prior contact had been aggressive and abusive. The sample contained a relatively high proportion of cases (nearly a fifth of those interviewed) where a violent family situation was reported.

For the majority, there had been greater tensions between the separated parents immediately after the separation. In a number of cases, the family scenario had changed over time: from being acrimonious to civil but unfriendly, or from civil but unfriendly relations to positive co-parenting. A minority of families described how relations had deteriorated over time, particularly at specific points in time, such as after legal proceedings. Not only was there great variation between the situations of separated families at the time of interview, but the needs of these families shifted and fluctuated over time.

Furthermore, even within one family ‘set’ there were differing perceptions of need between family members. Different viewpoints were particularly apparent between the resident and non-resident parent: for example, a number of non-resident parents
reported that their former partner was preventing contact, yet the resident parent felt that he was disinterested in the children.

4.2. The needs of families

4.2.1. The needs of non-resident parents

Eighteen non-resident parents were interviewed from seven local authority areas. Seventeen were men and only one interviewee was a non-resident mother.

Contact

The most common contact arrangement was for children to visit the non-resident parent at the weekend (either every week or every fortnight). This was especially likely to be the case where contact had been decided by the court. However, this was not necessarily an arrangement that suited the non-resident parent or, in their view, promoted the healthiest parenting approach. Some non-resident parents were critical of this ‘standard’ view of contact adopted by the courts, as they felt it prevented them being effectively involved in the routine, day-to-day life of the child. One non-resident father described how initially there was a shared care arrangement between him and his former partner, where contact was split equally throughout the week, but following court proceedings his contact was reduced to alternate weekends:

> You know I feel very strongly about it. I have very little impact on anything that ordinary parents would have, regarding the raising of my daughter. Literally the time I have with my daughter is segmented time. When she is not with me, it’s as though she is not my daughter.

Several non-resident fathers felt uninvolved in the daily upbringing of their children and thought that standard contact patterns created a detachment from their children. It was also difficult for a number of non-resident fathers to gain information on their children and to be regularly involved in key parenting decisions:

> ‘I’ve found it quite difficult to get information or, you know, to have anything to do with my son really, apart from the access that I have once a week’.

Because of the pattern of weekend visits, there was a tendency for contact to focus on fun and enjoyable activities such as fishing, watching football matches, playing golf, visiting the park, riding bikes, going on trips (e.g. to the beach), swimming and bowling. This focus on enjoyable activities worked against the non-resident parent being part of the normal aspects of child-care and decision-making, such as helping with homework, decisions and support about education, parenting decisions and routine discipline. This situation could potentially cause tension for both parents – the non-resident parent feeling excluded from key decisions in the child’s upbringing, and the resident parent experiencing all the burden of care and none of the enjoyment of being with the child.

Where contact could be agreed between the parents independently of the court system – typically where there was dual parenting or positive-co-parenting – it was likely to be more flexible in nature, with a larger element of shared care whereby the non-resident parent and resident parent were better able to negotiate around each other’s commitments. One non-resident parent described the current situation thus:
Now in the situation there is a lot of tolerance …she [ex-partner] understands my circumstances, and she shows a lot of consideration towards me as a result of that. And where I can help, I go out of my way to do so.

This might imply the greater use of services designed to help parents reach their own agreements without recourse to the legal system. However, as detailed in the later section on services (section 3.3.3), mediation is not necessarily the appropriate method.

Some of the non-resident parents stated that they were unhappy with the contact time that they had been awarded with their children, expressing the view that more contact time would be better for both themselves and their children. However, in these cases, the non-resident parents felt there was an onus on them to prove to the courts that the increased time was necessary and would be beneficial for the child/children. Several non-resident parents pondered how they could prove this, and why they should do so. This is expressed by one non-resident father:

The court system as it stands is giving me in their view good quality time with my daughter. And there would have to be very, very strong reasons to increase that time ...First of all I had to apply to have contact with my daughter. Then on application I had to justify the amount of time that I wanted with my daughter. The person that actually has control over my daughter didn't have to prove anything to a court to attain that control. But for me to want to spend time with my daughter I had to try and justify to somebody ... that it was beneficial to my own child to spend time with her dad.

A number of non-resident parents commented on the immediate, post-separation lack of contact with their child/children for several months and the impact that this had on their relationship with them. Once contact was granted or resumed, there was then a need to rebuild the relationship and the child's trust in them, and their continued role and presence in his/her life.

One non-resident parent explained how initially his ex-partner:

... wouldn't let me see my daughter for the first three months...She wouldn't let me come anywhere near her to see her. She just completely shut me out. So from being a parent who is responsible for, you know, getting my daughter up. Changing her nappy. Bottle-feeding her... And everything. You know, doing all that and all of a sudden, no contact. That was heart-wrenching.

The period immediately after separation was typically marked by hostility between separated parents, which frequently resulted in an initial period of irregular or limited contact. A number of non-resident parents found it extremely hard to adjust to these circumstances and, in particular, the lack of contact and daily involvement with their children.

Additionally, several non-resident parents reported on the difficulties and stress experienced as a result of what they deemed ‘malicious’ blocking of contact with their child/children by their former partner. Where animosity towards the non-resident parent was felt by the resident parent, the resident parent might (according to the non-resident parent) express their feelings of anger through ‘sabotage’ acts intended to hurt the non-resident parent by making relations with the child/children difficult. Reported acts of
malicious blocking of contact included: not passing on phone calls from the non-resident parent to the child/children; preventing the non-resident parent from taking the child/children on holiday or for days out, even though the non-resident parent was legally entitled to do so; sudden cancellation of agreed contact time; withholding or ‘losing’ a child’s mobile given to him/her by the non-resident parent; intercepting and not passing on letters between the non-resident parent and child/children; delivering the child/children off late or collecting them early; and making phone calls to the child/children or non-resident parent during their time together i.e. interrupting the few hours contact time they had together. One father described the difficulties he had in getting in touch with his children:

I can’t phone the house because she [ex-wife] won’t give me the house phone number. She’s had the house phone number changed … She is controlling it if you know what I mean. She is controlling it and then she will moan at me for not ringing them … in front of them [the children].

Similarly, another non-resident father described how his court order allowed him to telephone his daughter three times a week but was ‘lucky if I get through once a week’. Another non-resident parent expressed frustration that the plans he made with the children (such as outings or holidays) were frequently prevented: ‘if they sound too nice, we are not going’. This difficulty was reported by a number of non-resident parents: even in cases where regular contact arrangements had been established, they experienced a lack of flexibility from their former partner in terms of longer stays, outings or arranging holidays:

Well hopefully I’m going to take him to Florida in the summer holidays… But she’s [ex-partner] turned round and told him that she’s not going to let him go on holiday with me. I don’t know why.

A number of the non-resident parents argued that such acts might be viewed as minor misdemeanours if they were one-off instances, but when repeated frequently they had damaging consequences for the well-being of the child/children and their relationship with the non-resident parent. For example the child’s trust in their non-resident parent could be eroded and undermined, as they believed that their non-resident parent has forgotten about them, or cared less about them, or had broken a promise to them, as detailed by one interviewee:

She doesn’t want them coming down here or anything … you would think after five or six years somebody would get over something and let bygones be bygones and get on with it. I think they will (have emotional problems) if they haven’t already. I think they will have because of what their mother is doing… You know, because they are sort of wondering who to believe, who is in the right and who is in the wrong. It is difficult to explain that to a child but neither of us are in the right or the wrong, we just split up and that is that…. She shouldn’t say things to them.

Where there was animosity between former partners but agreed contact patterns had been arranged, a number of non-resident parents reported the emotional difficulty of having to communicate with their former partner in order to be able to spend time with their child/children. One non-resident parent indicated that he asked his father to accompany him to collect his child with him from his former partner’s home because
there was such a lot of anger and confrontation between them, and he felt that constantly witnessing these displays was extremely negative for the child:

I found it really, really difficult in the beginning to get any contact at all without confrontation … I didn’t feel that it was right for my son to see us arguing at the doorstep. I could actually see the worry and the anguish in his face, which used to upset me. So I actually asked my father to go and pick him up with me.

Long-term, ongoing, post-separation issues over contact (as well as parental responsibility and financial support) were reported by a number of non-resident parents. In cases where there was animosity between former partners, there might be a continual battle, with repeat court cases over a number of years. For the non-resident parent this might mean mixed periods of relative stability in contact with their child/children, and periods of partial or turbulent contact – or none at all.

It’s been a year since I’ve seen my daughter. Contact has been interrupted again so I’ve taken it back to court again….She’s flouted so many court orders, I’ve lost count… Given the opportunity we have a fantastic healthy, loving relationship….at the moment it just isn’t allowed to take place.

Non-resident parents reported that having interruptions to contact with their child/children, was both stressful and emotionally hard for them, and, in their view, also damaging to their relationship with their child/children.

Relationships
In reflecting on the relationship they had with their child/children, some non-resident parents indicated that they probably over-compensated to make up for not being there all the time for the child/children. Some non-resident parents reported ‘spoiling’ their child/children, either through material means, constant leisure activities, or being too ‘easy going’ with respect to the children’s normal boundaries. These non-resident parents suggested that because they had only a relatively small amount of time together at the weekend, they tended to focus on doing exactly what the child/children wanted to do in order to make them happy.

I have overcompensated for the fact that I don’t see him that often…sometimes I used to get to the stage where I feel like I’m trying to buy his affection.

However, other non-resident parents, in cases where animosity existed between the partners, reported that it was their former partner who spoiled their child/children in order to ‘buy’ the child’s favouritism and affection:

I don’t think my daughter knows what to do, what to say and who to believe and who not to believe. But the fact is her mum is buying her all, everything she wants. She is really spoilt. She is getting everything so she is siding that way for that reason.

Alternatively, in cases of positive co-parenting, non-resident parents typically reported ensuring that the child/children had the same ground rules and boundaries in their house as they did with the resident parent, and the non-resident parent felt there was no reason for either parent to spoil the child/children in order to improve their relationship with them.
A number of non-resident parents observed that their children could, and did, try to take advantage of each parent by, for example, threatening to go and live with the other parent if they could not get their own way, or making requests to one parent that the other parent had already refused. For those who parented co-operatively, the solution was simple:

Our daughter tries to cause arguments so she can get her own way … But we’re wise to it, so we just don’t fall into it. We phone each other up … And then we’ll get together and we’ll deal with it as a couple together.

Another indicator of positive co-parenting was the recognition by some non-resident parents that, though their children might be well-behaved with them during weekend visits, they might not be so consistently well-behaved with their former partner with whom they spent the bulk of their time. In such cases there was an appreciation of the parenting job being done by the ‘full-time’ parent:

I realise that being a mother and looking after the children… she plays a greater role. And it’s not right for me to impose my way of thinking on her when she’s the one who has to deal with the children. And I trust her to be a parent.

Some specific concerns were raised by non-resident parents about how their children were able (or not) to deal with the family separation, beyond the obvious issue of stable, ongoing contact with the non-resident parent. A number of non-resident parents indicated that children might have a lot of questions or ideas about why the separation occurred, and, indeed, hopes for reconciliation between their parents. Where the child/children could talk openly to the parents, parents were able to offer reassurance, leading to resolution and acceptance by the child/children. However, non-resident parents expressed concern about how confused thoughts and feelings could be resolved if the child/children could not talk openly to their parents:

But it did take him a while to get over the fact that I wasn’t with his mum and he had various questions. ‘Why did this happen? Did you split up because of me?’ And it’s just a case of setting his mind at rest. I would say he had that (issue) up until he was around 10.

Similarly, a source of high concern expressed by non-resident parents for children’s well-being concerned the degree of current and future emotional impact sustained by them, where the resident parent’s dislike of the non-resident parent was expressed openly. Although it might not be an overt intention of the resident parent, the child/children was effectively being asked to choose between their parents, to divide their loyalties, and to view one parent negatively.

It’s just very sad to see the way he feels completely stuck in the middle. Like he’s got to show total loyalty to his mother because he lives with her and she’s his mum, and she’s all he’s really known. I know he wants to come and spend time with me, and have time with me but he just feels like he can’t say anything.

The various observations and scenarios relayed by non-resident parents about their relationship with their child/children showed that a child’s stage in life is a major factor shaping the relationship between them. Where the separation had occurred early in the child’s life and communication between parents was civil or friendly, the non-resident
parents indicated that there was no observable impact on the child’s behaviour or their relationship with them, because for the child the situation of having one parent living elsewhere was normal:

*Well when we separated she was only three… so probably for the longest time now, she has only known us as separated parents.*

On the other hand, as children entered later childhood, they would have less time available to spend with their non-resident parent because of school commitments and social activities, but this was not necessarily viewed as a threat to the relationship.

*Me and my son used to go out a lot, we used to go to places, but now he’s at that age where he wants to be with his own age, you know …It’s just a case of he’s at the tender age of thirteen.*

Some non-resident parents reported that their children had resented or been reluctant to engage with their new partner and/or family. Most were not insensitive to the threat this appeared to pose to their children and not unaware of the possible negative impact that new partnerships – for either parent – could have on the overall family dynamics and, subsequently, the quality and time they had with their child/children:

*One of the reasons why I haven’t established a long term relationship with anyone, is because I don’t want there to be any more variations in the mix that could cause problems …I don’t want to upset that balance.*

A number of non-resident parents reported that relationships with their former partner, and consequently with their children, deteriorated when they re-married or had further children:

*It’s just sort of set it all off again and especially when we’ve got married and had a baby. It’s just got progressively worse and worse and worse. And contact has been sort of, you know, throttled back and more excuses have been made why he can’t come.*

### Mental health needs

A common theme running across the scenarios of the non-resident parent respondents was that separation from the child/children felt similar to bereavement:

*And I think fathers have a harder time because you still go through a grieving process for your children. It’s the only way I can describe it, like going through a bereavement.*

In addition, some non-resident parents expressed feelings of losing their ‘parental voice’ in terms of no longer having a say in their child’s upbringing, and for some this was extreme, with genuine feelings of disempowerment and hopelessness. One interviewee felt that non-resident parents were more likely to have mental health difficulties: ‘*You know, there’s a very good reason for it. And it’s because they realise their powerlessness*.’

A small number of the non-resident parents in the sample referred to experiencing some mental health problems (‘breakdown’, ‘depression’, ‘stress disorder’) either immediately
following the initial separation from the partner and children, or a number of years post-
separation when agreed contact with the children was repeatedly subject to disruptions.
In the latter case, the mental health difficulties were also associated with continued
stress over financial issues and repeat visits to solicitors and the courts, strong feelings
of disempowerment, and distress about actual or anticipated repeat episodes of loss of
contact with the children. One respondent commented that ‘In the beginning I found it
very hard to adjust and I had to go on antidepressants’ and another, describing the
anxiety around lost contact with their child stated:

For the first time in my life I’ve actually been diagnosed as being depressed …
you know the pressure of sort of not getting to see him and the feeling that he’s
slipping away. You know I might not see him again ever, or I might see him again
for a few years, or you know - it’s the unknown really.

Two respondents referred to suicidal thoughts, with one individual having attempted to
take his own life, and another indicating an understanding of why non-resident parents in
extreme cases do try to take their own lives.

Finances
The majority of non-resident parents did not report experiencing extreme financial
hardship, and nor did they indicate that as a result of financial difficulties they could not
provide their child/children with pleasurable activities, i.e. finances did not emerge as a
factor that they identified as impacting on the relationship they had with their
child/children. As this study focused on low-income families from deprived regions of the
UK, it is possible that financial shortages were normal for the majority of families
interviewed and that economic hardship was not seen as being specifically caused by
the separation.

However, a minority of respondents did report financial difficulties after separation. In
cases where there was on-going repeated dispute over contact and residence (i.e.
repeat court visits and requirement for solicitors’ services) individuals commented on the
cost of losing their home, their savings, and even their job when mental health problems
developed. While these respondents did not specifically link the relationship they had
with their child/children to their financial position, nonetheless the money being spent on
the legal case, and the reduced income/resources of the non-resident parent must lead
to less money being available by the non-resident parent to spend on the child/children.
Furthermore, where a second family existed the financial impact of legal disputes over
contact was experienced not only by the non-resident parent and their child/children, but
also by members of the new family.

Where the non-resident parents did report themselves to be in what they perceived as
considerable poverty, they did also indicate that financial assistance would be
appreciated to enable them to do slightly more for their child/children when they were
with them, for example, help with travel costs for days out or residential breaks.

As a young parent found it very hard financially. Just to get away you know, just
to get on the bus I’d have to think, you know, can I afford the bus fare if I’m going
to take her five miles away or something. Would I be able to bring her back?
I think being able to stay in a hotel or hostel for an evening or a weekend with her, just to have a break you know. Those things are just a dream because we can’t afford them.

Summary

- The most common contact arrangement was for children to visit the non-resident parent at the weekend, which was not necessarily a pattern that suited the non-resident parent or in their view promoted the healthiest parenting approach.
- ‘With ‘standard’ contact patterns designated by the courts, the non-resident parent felt excluded from daily childcare and key decisions in their child’s upbringing.
- Dissatisfaction was expressed in the lack of flexibility of court designated contact arrangements and the onus on the non-resident parent to prove that increased contact time benefited their child.
- Greater hostility between separated parents was reported immediately after separation, frequently leading to a period of irregular or limited contact with their children.
- A number of non-resident parents reported ongoing hostilities around contact, and several experienced the blocking of contact by their ex-partner.
- Non-resident fathers thought that the blocking of contact and continued animosity had a direct impact on their child’s well-being. In these situations, children were often drawn into arguments, and forced to divide their loyalties between separated parents.
- There were however, several cases of positive-co parenting where there was good communication, mutual agreement over parenting approaches, shared decision-making and greater appreciation for the role of each parent.
- The impact of separation affected children differently depending on their age at the point of parental relationship breakdown, and their needs for contact varied over time.
- New relationships or re-marriage were seen a risk to stability by the non-resident parents that could be a source of tension and affect contact.
- Feelings of hopelessness, disempowerment and a lack of control regarding contact were reported by non-resident parents.
- Mental health difficulties were a common theme among the interviewees, and there were reported cases of breakdown, stress, anxiety and depression.
- Financial difficulties post-separation were reported in a minority of cases, particularly regarding the financial impact of legal disputes and repeated court cases.

4.2.2. The needs of resident parents

The findings are drawn from 16 interviews with resident parents from separated families in seven UK local authority areas. Fourteen of the resident parents were women and only two were resident fathers.
Contact
Contact patterns between their former partner and the children varied significantly, depending on the particular family scenario. The largest number of cases were classified as ‘civil but unfriendly’, where standard patterns of contact had been established, though resident parents were often dissatisfied with these. In dual or positive co-parenting families the children tended to have frequent and regular contact with their non-resident parent, in contrast to the acrimonious cases in the sample, where contact was irregular. Additionally, four out of the fourteen resident parents stated that they had experienced domestic violence, and contact was very limited or had stopped completely.

In the majority of cases, contact occurred at the weekend only and the non-resident parent was not involved in the daily routine of parenting. Inevitably, the resident parents were significantly more involved than the non-resident parents in the children’s education, including choice of schools/subjects, helping with homework, transporting children to and from school, parents’ evenings and regular communication with schools. A large number of the resident mothers interviewed felt that the main burden of childcare was placed on them, and that this affected their relationship with their children:

\[ \text{It's all right for him because he gets all the nice side of the children and I get the weekly 'Let's go to school' and 'What's for tea?' and 'Put your shoes on.'} \]

They felt their children were spoiled or indulged whenever they visited their non-resident parent, and that their former partner did not take sufficient responsibility for the children’s upbringing. As stated previously, this was also a concern for some non-resident parents, who felt that contact occurred on a superficial level that focused on ‘fun’ weekend visits, and that they were detached from key parenting decisions and the daily lives of their children.

The resident parents had mixed views about the current contact arrangements: half the respondents were satisfied with the current contact levels and half expressed dissatisfaction. The primary reason for dissatisfaction in contact arrangements was that the respondents felt their former partner was disinterested and unreliable in contacting the children. They felt the non-resident parents frequently changed or cancelled contact agreements and showed a lack of interest in building relationships with their children:

\[ \text{I just wish he'd see the kids...that's all I want off him, for him to spend a little time and let them get to know their dad.'} \]

Even in situations where the resident parents were discontent with contact patterns, they wanted their former partners to spend more time and have greater engagement with the children: ‘If only he spent more time with them...was like a constant figure in their life.’

Several resident mothers described the importance of ensuring the father’s continued involvement and contact with the children. For example, one mother described how her new partner (also a non-resident father) experienced difficulties in gaining contact to his own son:

\[ \text{She [the former wife] felt like she was in control because the children still lived with her, which I think is really bad, it's wrong, because at the end of the day he's still the father. 'He might not want you [the former wife] but he still wants his child and you're not letting him.'} \]
In another case, where the mother was both a resident and non-resident parent, she described the importance of having everyday involvement in the lives of her non-resident children: ‘I wouldn’t be able to cope with not seeing the girls, with not having the girls here - I want them here every day.

The importance of the non-resident parent’s regular and routine involvement in the children’s lives was emphasised by the majority of resident parents. Even in certain cases where there was a history of drug addiction or domestic violence, several resident parents nevertheless emphasised the importance of contact: one mother, whose former partner was a heroin addict, stressed that ‘he’s still his dad’. However, in these situations contact was often irregular and extremely limited in form, and only continued because the resident parents felt their former partner was not a danger to the children. In the domestic violence cases, there was no communication between the separated parents, and any limited contact with the children occurred through a third party (through a family member or via a contact centre). In two of the domestic violence cases, contact between former partners and their children had stopped completely owing to continued threatening behaviour:

‘There are fathers in the world that deserve to see their kids and they’ve no rights and that’s not fair…yet I’ve got an ex-husband who don’t want to know his kids – he won’t change.

However, in the non-domestic violence cases, a number of resident mothers described tendencies to feel over-protective towards their children and admitted to restricting contact in the initial bitterness immediately following separation. In one case, the resident mother’s tendency to be over-protective was checked by her new partner, who reminded her of the importance of involving the children’s father:

I still look at my son as mine, because at the end of day he doesn’t belong to my ex-husband or to my new partner, he’s mine. And so I tend to protect that a little bit. Yet my new partner says straight away – no, you ring his dad and tell his dad.

Another resident mother prevented contact completely in the first year after separation:

We didn’t speak at first, obviously, and he didn’t see her for a long time as a baby. That was more on my part. It was just bitterness.

The resident parents frequently linked restrictions in contact and over-protective behaviour to the manner of their relationship breakdown: if, for example, the separation had been particularly acrimonious or if a third party had been involved at the final stages of their relationship.

Different approaches to parenting were a common source of tension from the resident parents’ perspective. In several cases, the resident parents felt that their former partner did not take sufficient parenting responsibility and only focused on enjoyable activities with the children. Yet in other scenarios, the resident mothers felt that their former partners were too strict in their parenting styles and approach to discipline:

Some men think that they need to be the disciplinarian and I think that he takes that role a bit too far…like he’ll tell her what to do instead of giving her a choice.
One mother felt that there were different expectations of the parenting role of women and men: the police investigated false allegations by her former partner that she was neglecting the children, even though he was a drug-addict:

*It quite alarms me that we’ve got a double standard on what we expect of a parent. We expect a mother or the resident parent to be absolutely perfect, yet the children can go and visit somebody who’s obviously a bad influence and nobody seems to frown upon that.*

A number of those interviewed expressed the need for additional support to non-resident parents to help improve their parenting skills: either to moderate tendencies to over-discipline children or to encourage greater involvement in their children’s daily lives.

**Relationships**

Communication between separated parents had a significant impact on the family scenario and also on patterns of contact. Acrimonious relationships were linked to irregular contact, while at the other end of the spectrum, cooperative relationships were associated with patterns of contact which suited all parties.

A large number of the resident parents interviewed reported that they had more arguments and poorer levels of communication with their former partners immediately after separation. This was apparent even in cases where positive-co parenting later developed between the separated parties. The tension and poor communication between parents in the immediate stages of separation frequently impacted on contact levels: in a significant number of cases, contact was irregular or stopped. Frequently, the bitterness between parents straight after separation disrupted discussions about their children: the tension prevented some parents from fully addressing the needs of their children:

*It was just down to the bitterness of the separation that we had. You know, we’d obviously try to sort out the kids but the conversation was always very short – he’d always cut me off or blank me out.*

A number of resident parents pointed out that poor communication and acrimony soon after separation was connected to the cause of their relationship breakdown: for example, if the separation was particularly hostile, if a third party had been involved, or if one person had unilaterally ended the relationship:

*When we first split up I didn’t really talk to him because of the way that we split up. Well the reason that we split up was because he cheated on me and then moved to Ireland with his new partner.*

Conversely, a number of resident parents who maintained a mutually supportive relationship with their ex-partners felt this was helped by the amicable nature of their separation.

Court proceedings appeared to polarise separated parents, creating acrimony and tension. One resident parent reported that she had a very positive relationship with her former partner until he initiated court proceedings:
We were friends up until he started taking me to court. I used to talk to him on the phone, but now I wouldn’t even pick up the phone if it rang…I have no contact whatsoever.

However, in a significant number of cases the separated parents managed to overcome the immediate bitterness of separation and over time developed a more positive relationship. In one case the parents had a very acrimonious relationship immediately after separation, but after a time they realised that this was damaging their son as he was being caught between the conflicting positions of each parent. Subsequently they decided to overcome their differences and not involve him in any further arguments:

We agreed that I won’t tell him anything and you [ex-husband] won’t tell him anything. Because I mean our son’s in the middle and I don’t know how it’s later going to affect him.

Characteristically, it took substantial time and effort on the part of both parents to overcome any acrimony and to develop a more positive relationship: one resident parent described the process of having to ‘foster links’ and how this ‘has taken a long time and didn’t just happen’. The importance of trying to place the children’s interests first, was seen as a key factor in trying to overcome the bitterness between separated parents:

There are parents that split up everyday and so long as you can put yourself on the backburner and deal with what you’ve got to deal with, which are the children, then that’s all you need to do - so long as parents can stay calm.

There were several examples of dual or cooperative parenting where the separated parents had either maintained or developed a mutually supportive relationship. In these situations decisions regarding the children were made jointly and there was good communication and support between the parents:

He’s still my big support network…we’re still very good friends… we’ve always said that the kids always come first.

In the majority of families interviewed the relationship between separated parents was civil but unfriendly, where contact patterns had been established but with underlying tensions between the parents. In these cases, communication between parents was limited and the majority of parenting decisions were taken by the resident parent. A number of resident parents interviewed reported a build-up of frustration with their former partner: this was either because they felt the non-resident parent was generally disinterested and did not sufficiently contribute to the children’s upbringing, or because of specific incidents, such as non-payment of child support or the cancellation of a contact arrangement. In a few cases, the relationship between separated parents fluctuated constantly, owing to a pattern of arguments or repeated difficulties, such as recurring mental health problems, in the lives of either parent. The more acrimonious relationships were characterised by hostile communication, continued arguments and strong disagreement around contact. In several acrimonious cases the resident parent felt their former partner was irresponsible or inconsistent with the children: for example, one resident father reported that his ex-wife had drug problems and would turn up late at night at the family home to create arguments. In another case, the resident mother felt that her former partner preferred to focus on his new family, and his contact with the children was sporadic and unpredictable.
According to the resident parents, the effect of the separation on their children also varied according to the specific family scenario. In examples of dual families or positive co-parenting, the children became relatively well-adjusted to their parents’ separation, and many interviewees discussed the ‘normality’ of separation for the children. A number of resident mothers felt that their children experienced the greatest distress and disruption immediately after separation:

*The initial upset was really the disruption… it became unpleasant and he had to deal with his mam and dad not liking each other and not speaking.*

Several parents from civil but unfriendly scenarios described how their children felt ‘stuck in the middle’ and drawn into arguments between their separated parents. The children found it difficult to understand the reasons for the separation and had a tendency to blame themselves. They also found it difficult to communicate their feelings and often became angry or upset:

*My son would just clam up. He would be very stubborn and just lock it up. If he doesn’t think he has to talk about it he won’t.*

In a minority of cases, the children were significantly damaged and affected by their parents’ separation, usually in acrimonious situations or those with domestic violence. For example, one resident mother reported that her daughter was still very angry and distressed about the separation and had begun seeing a school counsellor. In another case, the non-resident mother’s drug-addiction was seen to have created lasting damage to the children who were constantly angry, repeatedly ran away from school and home, and displayed problematic behaviour. In one family where domestic violence had been an issue, the children all had mental health needs: one girl was ‘very clingy’ towards her resident mother, a boy was ‘very aggressive’, the oldest girl ‘had a lot of het up anger’ and the oldest boy was very protective of his mother:

*Even though he’s only thirteen he’s the man of the house. And he’s taken so much responsibility. He worries about me… any slight noise and he’s awake. He thinks his dad is here.*

In over two-thirds of the cases the non-resident parent had a new partner or children. The resident parents were not unanimous in their feelings about these new relationships. Over time a number of resident parents developed a positive relationship with their former partner’s new family, and several reported that their children enjoyed the company of step-siblings and their non-resident father’s new wife. In these situations the non-resident parent’s new partner was seen to offer stability, and they helped the non-resident fathers to build stronger relationships with the children. For example, one resident mother whose ex-husband had mental health issues, felt that his new wife provided stability and encouraged contact with her son:

*I always think to myself, if you didn’t have her, he’d [ex-husband] go back to the two hours a week thing and wouldn’t have our son overnight. He’s got stability now.*

However, for a number of resident parents, their former partner’s new family was a contentious matter. Several reported that their former husband paid too much attention to his new family and was disinterested in spending time with children from their
relationship. For example, one resident parent felt that whenever her former husband ‘gets into a relationship, he cuts back contact with the children’. Similarly, another felt her former husband’s new wife was preventing and blocking contact: ‘she’d like us to be his old family, and for us not to have anything to do with her husband’. A number of resident mothers felt that their former husband favoured their new children, which caused rivalry between step-siblings. There was also particular contention when the new family adopted the non-resident parent’s surname. Continued feelings of resentment over their former partner’s new relationship were particularly prevalent if this third party was part of the reason for the separation: ‘that’s the worse part of when you split up and have a divorce – when there’s somebody else’.

Additionally, several resident parents reported that their children found it difficult when they themselves gained new partners. Frequently their children worried that a new partner could jeopardise the existing relationship they enjoyed with their resident parent. The children often displayed over-protective behaviour towards their resident mother and took considerable time to adjust to the new circumstances.

**Additional needs**

Following separation, nearly half of the resident parents interviewed experienced mental health difficulties, primarily depression or anxiety, which they attributed to the breakdown of the relationship. A number reported feeling isolated and alone, and that they struggled initially to readjust to the new circumstances: ‘If somebody’s leaving you, you’ve got twenty four hours a day on your own with a small baby’. They found it difficult to cope with their poor mental health alongside the burden of everyday childcare:

> You’re thrown into this new world…it isn’t just like your children’s emotions - you’ve got to cope with your own emotions as well. You’ve still got to keep yourself straight-laced and tell the children that it’s fine.’

However, unlike the non-resident parents, the majority of resident parents overcame these problems relatively quickly, which they thought was due to the immediate pressure of having to care for the children and maintain a domestic routine.

The majority of resident parents had a low income and were experiencing financial hardship. In particular, a number felt frustration at the lack of sufficient child support payments from their former partners. One resident father reported that he was under financial strain after the separation, because his wife controlled all the finances and was in extensive debt: ‘She left me absolutely penniless. I had nothing because she dealt with all the finances’. Another mother felt that single mothers who worked part-time, rather than receiving state benefits, needed more financial support: ‘You don’t get free school dinners, you don’t get help with uniform, and you don’t get full legal aid’.

The seven locations where the interviews took place were selected because they had relatively high levels of deprivation, and the interviews highlighted the impact of the local area on families, a matter of concern for many resident parents. In particular, they were concerned about the safety of their children and finding places for their children to play outside where they were not in danger: ‘The local park is full of druggies and even I don’t visit there’. A number of those interviewed also felt that there were limited activities or venues for children, and especially older children, in the local area: ‘There isn’t really a lot to do – there isn’t anything for teenagers’.
Domestic violence and intimidation, both during and after the separation, featured relatively frequently among the cases in the sample. In one case the former husband came to the family home and threatened the resident mother with a knife. In another situation, the resident mother experienced violence from her husband’s extended family:

They came into the bedroom one morning and said 'I want the girl'. She [the mother-in-law] started pulling at her legs to take her. I got pushed onto the bed. It got bad. She was banging me against cupboards.

It was not within the remit of this study to examine the extent or nature of violence in divorce and separation, although it was acknowledged that this is a not uncommon feature of intact or broken relationships, and that it is not confined to low-income families.

Summary

- Relations between parents were more tense immediately following separation or after court proceedings had taken place. Several resident parents admitted that they restricted contact in the initial bitterness of separation.
- Restriction in contact or over-protective behaviour towards the children immediately after separation were more likely to occur if the relationship breakdown had been particularly acrimonious or if a third party had been involved.
- Communication between separated parents significantly affected contact: in acrimonious situations, contact was irregular and sporadic, while positive communication was associated with regular patterns of contact.
- In several cases, the parents were able to overcome their tensions and develop a more positive and mutually supportive relationship, where there was greater shared decision-making and increased contact.
- Among resident parents, the primary reasons for dissatisfaction with contact arrangements were their former partner’s unreliability and apparent disinterest in the children.
- Many resident parents felt that their former partner did not take sufficient responsibility for the children’s upbringing and they felt left with the burden of childcare.
- Different approaches to parenting were a common source of tension between the parents. Resident parents resented in particular the laissez-faire approach of some non-resident parents, where the focus of contact was enjoyment and there was an absence of responsibility. The most successful cases were those where parents worked cooperatively and both adopted an authoritative approach.
- There was no consensus on the effect of new relationships of their former partners: some parents thought this helped non-resident fathers build stronger relationships with the children, yet others felt that their former partners favoured the new family.
- Nearly half the resident parents experienced short-term mental health difficulties following separation: these were overcome mainly due to the necessity of caring for children.
- Financial difficulties were a recurrent theme among the interviewees, especially frustration at the lack of sufficient child support from former partners.
In almost a quarter of cases, the resident parent experienced actual or threatened domestic violence after the separation.

4.2.3. The needs of children

Interviews with 17 children in six UK locations took place in the study.

Contact

The most common contact arrangement was for children to visit their non-resident parent at the weekend (either every week or every fortnight). This was especially likely to be the case where contact had been decided by the court. The tendency for contact to be weekend-focused raised issues for a number of children. In one case, it was difficult to fit defined contact times around the non-resident father’s shift-work. In another, the older child in the family found it hard to balance completing school-work and visiting his father at weekends:

I would like to see him more often but it’s a bit tight because it would take up most of my time and I wouldn’t be able to get some of my homework done. (13 year-old male)

Similarly a number of children felt that weekend-only visits denied them social time at home with their friends. Due to the pattern of weekend visits, there was a tendency for contact to focus on fun and enjoyable activities, with the result that the non-resident parent was less involved with day-to-day routine activities and decisions.

More than a third of the children interviewed stated that they would like more contact with their non-resident parent, and for older children flexibility of visiting arrangements was a key part of this. Those children who did have flexible arrangements valued being able to choose when and for how long to visit their non-resident father. However, there is an argument in favour of more rigid arrangements for younger children where routine and regularity are important to their feelings of security. Contact should be seen as an evolving process, which takes heed of the needs and wishes of the child and not as a fixed deal agreed by adults.

Variation in the children’s satisfaction of their current contact arrangements is linked to the diversity of family scenarios of those interviewed. Children who were experiencing dual parenting would often make spontaneous visits to their non-resident parent, a situation which was facilitated by the parents living within walking distance of each other and having a good level of communication.

I get to choose how much I go. If I want to, I can always say to mum, ‘Can I go to Dad’s?’ And when I’m at Dad’s…I can always go. ‘Dad, can I go to my Mum’s?’ (10 year-old female)

If it was quite far away then you’ve got to rely on people giving you lifts…whereas seeing like he lives only round the corner, I can just walk up whenever I feel like it. (16 year-old male)

Situations of positive co-parenting were characterised by the child having regular and established patterns of contact. The children often felt relatively well-adjusted to their parents’ separation and most were satisfied with the levels of contact, even though this was slightly more systematic than in the dual-families scenario. Even though they had
high levels of contact with their non-resident parent, the children tended to feel slightly closer to their resident parent.

The majority of children lived with civil but unfriendly relations between their parents, and many felt dissatisfied with the contact arrangements. They described missing their non-resident father, expressed the wish to visit for longer periods and take holidays together, and in some cases felt that their non-resident parent spent too much time with their new family at their expense. A number felt ‘caught in the middle’ between both parents, and several reported that they missed their resident parent and friends during contact.

There were several acrimonious cases where communication between the children’s parents was very hostile, and in these cases the children were more likely to have experienced gaps and irregularities in contact. Where domestic violence featured in the parents’ relationship, contact with their non-resident parent in these situations was extremely limited or had completely stopped, but this was not a cause of distress to the children. One child, aged eight, reported feeling scared around her father and stated that he was ‘not her friend’, while another, aged 16, described ‘hating’ the family situation before the parents separated.

The majority of children interviewed felt that contact with their non-resident parent was extremely important to them and they enjoyed spending time together.

I get to see him, do you know, most of the time so it doesn’t really bother me as long as I get to see him. If I don’t get to see him then I’m a bit sad about it. (10 year-old female)

A number of children described how they looked forward to spending time with their non-resident parent and in the joint activities they did together. Living near to their non-resident parent was an important issue for many children as it affected contact levels: one girl, aged eight, described that when her father temporarily moved to Ireland after their parents separated she felt as if she ‘didn’t know him’, and she was significantly happier now that he was living nearby.

Relationships

The majority of children felt that they had a good relationship with their non-resident parent and felt happy when visiting this parent. For several of the older boys interviewed, sharing certain activities and interests – fishing, watching football, playing golf – with their non-resident father seemed particularly important. However, the teenage boys interviewed also valued simply talking and spending time with their father and felt it was ‘enough to be able to see him.’ (16 year-old male)

Irregular contact, a feature of unfriendly or acrimonious parental relationships, gave the child the impression that the non-resident parent was either disinterested in them or too busy to spend time with them. One 10 year-old boy felt that his non-resident father ‘needed time to himself’, and a 14 year-old girl had the impression that her father ‘was not really bothered about seeing her’. The majority of children in these situations expressed the desire to have more regular contact with their father, as this would help them feel more wanted and valued.
The mental health difficulties and alcohol consumption of some non-resident parents had a continuing impact on their children. In particular, several children reported that this led to rising stress levels and antagonism. One ten year-old felt that his non-resident father drank too much and then became easily stressed with him. For another child, aged 14, the depression of his non-resident mother caused her to anger easily, which made him, too, unhappy and depressed. Even beside these difficulties, the children still valued the relationship with their non-resident parent and wanted increased contact time.

The majority of children interviewed felt slightly closer to their resident parent than to their non-resident parent. The resident parent was a key stabilising factor in the children’s lives and, for the majority of children, the first person the child would approach with a problem. A number of children described missing their resident parent during contact:

*When I’m here, I miss my dad a lot, and then when I’m at my dad’s I miss me mum, it’s hard like that, but I deal with that sort of thing.* (12 year-old male)

Similarly, most children spent more time with their resident parent’s extended family than with that of their non-resident parent, and consequently felt closer to grandparents, aunts and cousins on the resident parent’s side. The children who did have contact with the extended family of their non-resident parent when visiting the non-resident parent (about half the sample) felt this was very important to their sense of belonging.

Over two-thirds of the children had a non-resident father who had re-partnered and they now had step-siblings or half-siblings. Half felt they had developed a positive relationship with the new family members and enjoyed spending time with them; several children described half-siblings as friends or as ‘like my real sister and brother’. However, the other half found the new siblings/partner a source of stress: one 10 year-old boy felt a sense of rivalry and competition with his half-brothers and a 10 year-old girl felt she was treated differently by her father’s extended family: ‘my half-side of the family, I don’t get on with as good … [they] make me feel really different and treat me different’.

One teenage boy, aged 14, felt his non-resident mother had a tendency to unburden her relationship difficulties on him, which was a source of strain. In the more acrimonious family scenarios, the new partner/half-siblings were a particular source of tension: one girl reported that her father was more interested in spending time with his new family and that she felt an unwanted ‘addition’ to her non-resident father’s new life:

*I’d like him to spend more time with me … he thinks it’s enough, but it isn’t, because, I mean, his family’s got him all week. And we have him for like three hours.* (14 year-old female)

Several children interviewed had experienced multiple separations in the family and had a range of step-siblings: Two interviewees had older siblings with different fathers from their own, who were also separated from their resident mother. In another case, the child’s mother was both a resident and a non-resident parent: the half-siblings of the girl (aged 10) did not live with the mother but visited regularly.

**Additional needs**
Several of the children interviewed had difficulties in maintaining relationships with other children, and were either being bullied or found it hard to make friends. One 10 year-old girl had a problem with bullies both at school and in her local area. An eight year-old boy...
felt extremely unhappy at school because he had no playmates, which made him feel ‘very sad.’

A significant number of the children reported that there were no activities for young people locally and they did not feel safe in their area. One child described how the police were regularly called to the neighbourhood and a few children detailed how they and their friends had got into difficulties with the police.

Following separation, several children reported that they had moved house/area and in one case the child was unhappy in her new school: in this situation the family separation had a direct impact on the child’s education by having to move to a less reputable school.

**Summary**

- The majority of children felt that regular contact with their non-resident parent was extremely important to them and they enjoyed spending time with this parent. Living close to him/her was a key issue for a number of children.
- Over a third of children wanted more contact with their non-resident parent: older children appreciated greater flexibility in contact, whereas routine and regularity were important for younger children and their resident parent.
- The most common contact arrangement for children was to visit their non-resident parent at weekends: this meant that contact focused on enjoyable activities rather than more routine parenting such as support with homework or decisions about upbringing.
- The relationship between separated parents impacted directly on the feelings of the child: where there were acrimonious or unfriendly relations, the child was more likely to experience gaps in contact, to feel ‘caught’ between the competing needs of parents, and dissatisfied with contact arrangements.
- Irregular contact gave children the impression that the non-resident parent had no interest in them or was too busy for them. Regular contact made children feel valued and wanted.
- The children’s relationship with their non-resident parent and contentment with the family situation was linked to levels of contact: positive co-parenting allowed children to feel more integrated into the lives of both parents and more satisfied with their family context.
- The majority of children felt closer to their resident parent, who was a key stabilising factor in their lives and the first person they would turn to with a problem.
- Some children enjoyed spending time with a non-resident parent’s new partner and new siblings, while others found them a source of tension.

### 4.3. Perceptions of services

#### 4.3.1. Awareness of services

All respondents had very low awareness of support services and potential avenues of advice. The majority of non-resident parents indicated that they did not know what sources of support, advice or information existed for separating families and non-resident parents. While legal services and mediation were typically identified and associated with
separation and child contact (even if not used), there was relatively little knowledge or take-up of any other sources of support and information by respondents. One non-resident father commented:

I didn’t know that there was any help, I wasn’t made aware of anywhere that could help other than the mediation…I think it’s ignorance… Because people don’t know and the information’s not available…Obviously if the service were advertised better, you would find a lot more people using those services. (Non-resident father, Area 6)

Similarly, the majority of resident mothers interviewed were unaware of services that specifically helped support separated families, and felt there was a general lack of information on available provision. Schools were identified as a key source that could provide information and signposting to services. However, resident parents though that other public organisations should also provide greater information for separated families, including the Citizens Advice Bureau, social service offices, GPs’ surgeries, libraries and family solicitors. Furthermore, available services should be more widely advertised in local newspapers and notice boards.

I can’t say I’ve ever really noticed any flyers or leaflets that are to do with people splitting up or divorce… it’s not something that’s in your face is it really? If you need help you’ve got to go out and get it. (Resident mother, Area 4).

Among the children interviewed there was also very low awareness about external services which could potentially help them deal with the family separation. Should they wish or need to discuss issues related to their family separation and their contact arrangements, the children would first speak to close family members, typically their resident parent, siblings or another member of the immediate family whom they trusted. Information and advice services for separated families were the most pressing need for both non-resident and resident parents. Signposting of various services would have helped improve separated families’ awareness of potential avenues of support and sources of direct advice on different family situations.

I think it’s the advice that people need. You need the advice when you split with somebody… knowing there’s children involved and you have to sort things out for their sake. A facility should be available for women and men really to ask advice. (Resident mother, Area 4).

Mainstream services did not systematically target separated families for direct support or to offer signposting to other services. A number of interviewees found it difficult approaching services providers and requesting help.

I’m one of those people who feels like I’m a pain phoning upset…I don’t want to chase them [service providers] crying and upset. (Resident mother, Area 1).

Some individuals going through separation, and especially those who are particularly vulnerable, for example, because of poor mental health, do not feel able to request help or are not aware that support was available. The majority of non-resident and resident parents both expressed the desire for a more proactive approach by mainstream services in terms of offering information, advice and signposting.
No there was never really anything available…nothing was really ever put out there. It was as though it was swept under the carpet. And even working in the school sector, there’s not even information that comes into school really.
(Resident mother, Area 6).

It appeared that families in more acrimonious situations were far more likely to be targeted for support and to have accessed available services. From the non-resident parents’ interviews, it appeared that where there was animosity between former partners and protracted disputes over contact, respondents were more likely to cite a need for support and information, or to give actual instances of take-up. Similarly, from the resident parents’ interviews, it was those individuals in the more acrimonious situations or those who had experienced domestic violence who had had significantly greater access to support services.

The majority of separated families had limited contact or support from service providers. This suggests that most separated families are not being reached by providers and are not accessing available support. However, in a number of cases, typically characterised by friendly relations between former partners, the non-resident parents indicated that they did not feel the need to access any support or information services to help them make decisions or negotiate with their former partner about their child/children. In these cases, the non-resident parents expressed the view that it was easier and more straightforward to work out the contact and financial arrangements with their former partner independently of external help (even where initial tension and anger existed at the initial point of separation). As one respondent commented: ‘I didn’t want to drag them through the courts anyway. It’s not fair on them [the children]’ (Non-resident father, Area 3). These respondents typically reported that from the moment of separation, it became very much about focusing on what their child/children needed, and minimising the pain of the separation for their child/children.

Greater flexibility of provision would suit the diversity of the cases. A number of interviewees felt there was a lack of flexible service options available – those that had contact with services were offered ‘standard’ support services such as mediation, but had limited awareness of other alternatives. Even within one socio-economic group such as low-income families, the circumstances surrounding family separation are extremely diverse and more information on alternative service options would have been appreciated.

Only three children interviewed had had contact with an external support service. These were typically in cases where the relationship between the parents was extremely hostile. Other children received no support and were unaware of services or avenues of support available to them. For example, only one child interviewed had had contact with multiple service providers and this was from an extreme case that involved domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse. Service providers only appeared to reaching children in the most difficult circumstances.

Children from separated families had few people in their lives with whom they felt able to speak. One boy felt isolated at school because none of his peers had parents living apart, and he often became angry or ‘got into fights’. A third of child respondents did not normally discuss their family situation with others, only hypothetically describing the people they would turn to for support. This was either because they did not feel the need to discuss their parents’ separation – the family separation had become ‘usual’ for the
child – or because the subject was too sensitive to raise. Most children gained support from close family (usually the resident parent), and in some cases they found it helpful to share their feelings with close friends, and especially those who also had separated parents. However, the three older boys interviewed would not speak to close friends as it was not usual to share intimate feelings: as one 13 year-old boy remarked, ‘\textit{It’s not the sort of thing you talk to about with your mates.}’ In sharing their feelings about the family separation, trust seemed to be an important consideration for the majority of children. A number of children reportedly would find it difficult speaking to a teacher because they did not feel close to them: ‘\textit{I would rather have someone like, like I can trust, like I don’t really know the teachers}’ (12 year-old male, Area 2).

It would appear that greater awareness of potential sources of support would be helpful to children: one girl reported that she did not know who to tell about her father’s violence towards her mother. School staff are probably best placed to help children and young people (assuming that they do attend school) as they have the most frequent and regular contact. However, they appeared on the whole to be unaware, or not made aware, of young people’s personal circumstances and consequently did not always refer them to any counselling services which existed. One 16 year-old girl from Area 6 reported that ‘\textit{[It would be helpful] if people in schools were more aware of counsellors… and (you) could ask to see them or if the school is more aware of things that were going on}’. However, the sensitivity of giving children information on family separation was also raised in the interviews – one resident mother became defensive when her daughter began taking home information on separation from school and prevented her from bringing home more material.

Non-resident fathers had significantly less contact or awareness of support services than non-resident or resident mothers. Many of the non-resident fathers in the sample had difficulty speculating about what might be of help to others in a similar situation to themselves or to those going through some of the difficulties of adjusting to being part of a separated family. The study appeared to suggest that fathers were less likely to ask for support or be aware of available provision: interestingly the two non-resident mothers interviewed both indicated that they felt there were adequate sources of support and information available to non-resident parents, and specifically cited services provided by the voluntary sector, including help-lines, parents’ groups and specialist provision (such as domestic violence services). One non-resident mother commented:

\begin{quote}
\textit{I think that everything’s available, basically. They’ve even got single parent groups. There’s far more over the past ten years or more... There’s so much choice now you don’t know where to start…There’s a lot of organisations and help and groups.} (Resident mother, Area 7)
\end{quote}

Though the majority of resident mothers in the study felt there were limited services available, in comparison with non-resident fathers they had greater awareness of and contact with support services. There do, therefore, appear to be questions over whether or not the services that do exist are being adequately advertised and promoted to all non-resident parents (i.e. irrespective of gender) and, also, whether there are adequate sources of support and information for non-resident fathers.
Summary

- Legal and mediation services were typically identified and associated with separation, but there was very little knowledge or take-up of other avenues of support.
- Families in the more acrimonious situations or who experienced domestic violence had significantly greater access to support services.
- Non-resident fathers had significantly less contact and awareness of support services than either non-resident or resident mothers. Fathers appeared less likely to ask for support.
- Mainstream services did not specifically target separated families for direct support or offer signposting to alternative forms of provision.
- Information and advice services were the most pressing need for both non-resident and resident parents, including greater sign-posting to available services – schools were identified as a key source of information, but also social services offices, GPs', surgeries, libraries and family solicitors were seen as relevant locations.
- A number of interviewees felt there was a lack of flexible service options – the minority who did have contact with providers were offered ‘standard’ services such as mediation, but were unaware of alternative service options.
- There was a shortage of trusted people that children from separated families could speak to outside the family. Most children would only seek help from close family members or friends.

4.3.2. The legal system

The legal system was identified by interviewees as a specific service used during separation in order to sort out residence or contact arrangements. Half of the families interviewed had contact with the courts after separation. Resident parents gave very minimal comments on the legal system, whereas non-resident parents found legal services a particular point of tension and discussed this in greater depth. The children interviewed had no comments on the legal system, except for one older girl in a case of domestic violence.

The point at which separated parents initiated legal proceedings regarding child contact and care varied typically in accordance with the nature of their relationship with their ex-partner. Where animosity between separated parents was high, often recourse to the legal system was fairly immediate following separation, but in cases where there was greater civility between parents, there might have been an initial attempt to resolve the residence and contact arrangements independently of legal intervention. However, due to growing frustration, emerging difficulties on either parental side at any time, or a specific incident (for example, changing the children’s surname), either parent might have been prompted to take the issue to a solicitor. In this sample, all legal proceedings were initiated by non-resident fathers, except in four cases of domestic violence where the resident mothers sought restraining orders/injunctions on their ex-partners.

Contact and parenting roles

Overall, the non-resident parents interviewed expressed a high degree of dissatisfaction with the legal system. In particular, the non-resident parents disagreed with the ‘typical’ contact model promoted by the courts, which focused on contact every weekend or
every second weekend. They felt this approach created an unnatural scenario of care and parenting: the resident parent had the bulk of the day-to-day responsibility for the children (including education, health, and rules / norms in terms of the child’s social activities and diet), and the non-resident parent was unable to spend equal time with the children, and therefore could not significantly contribute to any decisions about their child’s upbringing. A number of respondents indicated that they felt hurried by solicitors and the legal system into agreeing that one parent had prime responsibility for the children’s care. Subsequently they felt that the other parent (themselves) was delegated into ‘part-time parenthood’, rather than the courts fully exploring the option of shared parenting:

(The legal system) inadvertently shepherd you down a particular route… it’s only when you speak to one of the parents or the dads that have been through the situation, you realise there were alternatives that could have been taken, that possibly could have worked better for you. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

Many of the non-resident parents within the sample continued to live within close proximity to their children, and some suggested that a more flexible ‘shared care plan’ could and should have been explored, as described by one non-resident parent:

I unfortunately quickly found out I was being shepherded into non-resident status…That’s the way the courts were leaning and I couldn’t for the life of me understand why that was the case… because [previously] we’d been sharing the care of our child. There was no reason for me to understand the concept of non-resident parent… In fact the term wasn’t even coined until I went to see a solicitor …. It means I’m a second class parent. It means I’ve even less than a second class parent. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

The non-resident parents interviewed felt that there should be greater flexibility in the contact arrangements designated by the courts, which would more adequately reflect the individual circumstances of separated families. Several non-resident fathers felt that parenting plans and parenting support should be incorporated as a matter of routine into the legal process.

You know, if people go and see a solicitor they should be given a parenting plan booklet. Both sets of parents, so that they can work out how we are going to agree things. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

They felt that this would help the parents to focus jointly on the child’s needs and their responsibilities as parents to overcome animosity, rather than concentrating on their own anger and upset towards their ex-partner:

Similarly, the majority of non-resident parents, including those who did not have contact with the legal system, felt that the courts had a tendency to assume that the mother was the prime carer in all circumstances, as mentioned by one non-resident father:

If there is no threat or risk to the child from the non-resident parent, no question of the non-resident parent ever having been anything other than a reasonable parent, and there is a desire by the child or children still to have full contact with their non-resident parent, then why does the law not presume equal contact, and
equal parenting care and responsibilities for both parents? (Non-resident father, Area 1)

Many non-resident fathers felt frustrated at an apparent assumption within the law and society, that the mother is the more natural and better parent. Similarly, several reported that they had to ‘prove their worth as a father’, to justify their parenting role and the benefit of spending time with their children.

You need a basic assumption in law, that unless there is good reason for it not to happen, shared care should be the basic default position for all parents that separate… at the moment, one parent has all the control of the child. They have all the power in terms of what is done, or said around this child. And you obviously will have a power struggle. It shouldn’t be. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

They argue that this arrangement is assumed, without any exploration of the individual family context and patterns, including what involvement the non-resident father has had in the child’s upbringing and care before the separation.

There were very limited comments by the resident parents regarding the legal system. The resident mothers made no comment on the workings of the legal regime or of their experiences during court proceedings. However, both of the resident fathers interviewed felt that the legal system favoured the mothers in terms of contact and residence. One resident father was initially refused residence immediately after the separation even though he had strong evidence of his wife’s severe mental health problems. He felt this was due to bias in the legal system.

We went to court and everything went in favour of the mother. We had literally everything. Police reports, council reports… hospital reports, child welfare officer, yet he [the judge] thought it was in the best interests of the child to be with the mother. (Resident father, Area 7).

The second resident father also felt that the courts favour the mother. He described how his former partner was a drug addict with mental health problems, but she still regained custody of one of their children.

The courts…to me always err on the mother’s side…don’t matter that round here we’ve got women who are druggies…been in and out of prison…they [the courts] will not stop contact with their children. (Resident father, Area 5).

Needs of the entire family

The non-resident parents who were interviewed commented on the impersonal, ‘business-like’ and ‘adversarial’ (parent against parent) nature of the legal service provision received: ‘I’m aware that they are running a business… and sometimes they forget that people are involved in the process.’ (Non-resident father, Area 2). A number of respondents suggested that legal professionals focus on treating the individuals in separated families not as members of the same family but as opposing adversaries of a ‘case’. Some respondents reported feeling that agreements are brokered between solicitors to match the typical contact approach adopted within the UK, rather than trying to meet the needs and interests of the child/children.
You’re so entrenched in the battle, that what’s in the best interests of the child has gone out the window… you’re in encouraged to barter over your child. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

Similarly, a number of non-resident parents reported that they had a different judge for each court hearing, which created a risk that the family/case history might not be fully appreciated or understood. They felt that the legal system did not sufficiently consider the particular context and scenario of each family, and that the outcome did not necessarily best serve the interests of either parent.

They have two vulnerable, frightened parents who approach them. Two angry parents who approach them and who basically just want to lash out initially because they’re frightened. They do nothing about bringing a bucket of water for the fire…They throw more wood on. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

The non-resident parents felt that animosity between separated parents invariably increased following contact with the legal system. Even in situations where contact had been good initially and relations civil, after legal proceedings the dynamic shifted to an adversarial one and the parental role of the non-resident parent very rapidly became diminished. The resident parents, likewise, felt that acrimony and tension between the parents were greatest at these times, as detailed by one resident parent: ‘we were friends up until he started taking me to court… and now I’d have no contact whatsoever’ (Resident mother, Area 1). Those interviewed felt that the legal system tended to divide families and increase antagonism between separated parties, rather than considering the needs of the family as a whole and working out solutions to meet the flexible and changing needs of individual families.

Where no recourse was made to the courts regarding contact with the child/children, there was greater flexibility around shared responsibility and caring. This typically occurred in situations of positive co-parenting between separated parties, where there was a joint agreement to focus on the child’s needs and interests, regardless of what had occurred within the parents’ relationship. Several non-resident parents suggested that a method to avoid the adversarial approach within the legal system would be to assign a single solicitor to the entire case: the child’s needs and interests would then become the primary focus, rather than concentrating on the divided rights and wants of mothers and fathers.

I’d like to have a truly independent legal advisor. And I think for both parents, there should be one assigned to families… I’m talking about advice, as opposed to just going through processes… someone there to actually guide and advise people. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

Additional needs
In the acrimonious family scenarios, a number of non-resident parents expressed frustration at the lack of enforcement powers within the legal system to ensure that the resident parent abides by court orders. There was a concern that, although the judiciary might have ordered one particular course of action, in instances where the resident parent did not abide by the ruling there was no resulting penalty for failing to do so. Rather, the onus was placed on the non-resident parent to bring back the issue of non-compliance to a judge to have it. This further heightened their disappointment with the
legal system and sense of powerlessness as a non-resident parent or ‘non-parent’. One non-resident parent described his frustration:

_I’ve gone to court. I’ve got contact orders, it doesn’t make any difference…I mean I’ve got court orders saying I can have the children overnight at weekends. I don’t have them. She won’t let me. So much for courts._ (Non-resident father, Area 6)

For non-resident parents in cases of ongoing dispute over contact, the cost of the legal proceedings could be extremely high (including solicitors’ bills and time off work for court appearances). Furthermore, a large number of the non-resident parents interviewed reflected upon the cost and outcomes of using a solicitor. They suggested that independent, free legal advice about the options available and possible outcomes of different courses of action was needed: ‘There ought to be some kind of independent body that understands what parental responsibilities and rights are’ (Non-resident father, Area 2). This type of information and advice was thought to be needed both at the critical point of separation when both parents were emotionally vulnerable and later, during flashpoints such as difficulties experienced in contact or relations owing to changes in the family structure or resources. The resident parents interviewed also felt that there was a lack of information on alternative services, such as mediation, in solicitors’ offices or at the court. Some thought that divorcing couples should automatically be sent information on local services for separated families, though they did not specify who should be responsible for this.

A number of resident mothers who had experienced domestic abuse found the high levels of media attention surrounding fathers’ rights campaigns problematic. One felt that there should be greater sensitivity towards domestic violence cases and recognition that some non-resident fathers had been abusive:

_I feel like everyone seems to be very sensitive about not offending the non-resident parent, but shouldn’t you be thinking of me and my concerns?_ (Resident mother, Area 2)

Summary

- Overall the non-resident parents expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with the legal system – they felt there should be greater flexibility in the contact arrangements designated by courts that more adequately reflected the variation and specific circumstances of separated families.
- There was frustration that the courts, and wider society, tend to assume that the mother is the prime carer as well as the more natural and better parent. Non-resident fathers found they had to justify to the courts their parenting role and the benefit to their children of spending time with them.
- Both of the resident fathers interviewed felt that the courts favoured the mothers in terms of access and residence.
- If no recourse was made to the courts, there was greater flexibility around shared parental responsibility and care.
- It was suggested that a method to avoid the adversarial approach within the legal system, would be to assign a single solicitor to the entire case of the family, which would encourage a more holistic approach to the family, where the child’s
needs and interests, rather than the conflicting demands of parents, were the primary focus.

- When court orders were ignored, the lack of enforcement powers within the legal system was a common cause of concern to non-resident parents.
- In ongoing contact disputes, the financial cost of court proceedings was a particular burden to non-resident parents. They advocated independent free legal advice on alternative courses of action prior to initiating court proceedings.
- Both non-resident and resident parents felt that individuals going through court proceedings should automatically be given information on alternative methods of dispute resolution and the range of relevant local support services.

4.3.3. Services for separating and separated families

Mediation
Notwithstanding the fact that many parents who had experienced the adversarial system of resolving disputes through the courts were in favour of finding other methods of agreeing residence and contact arrangements, those who had used mediation had not found this helpful in resolving antagonism or making agreements. Non-resident parents who did experience mediation services had a poor relationship with their former partner and, regardless of whether the mediation sessions were ordered by the court or opted for voluntarily, they overwhelmingly reported that they were of little assistance in improving personal relationships or progressing disputed issues around contact or approaches to parenting. Respondents reported that mediation was not suitable or not helpful, either because the resident parent refused to participate or that she/he stopped attending after a few sessions. Non-resident parents expressed the view that where animosity existed towards them from the resident parent, nothing could be achieved through negotiation unless the resident parent’s mindset could be shifted from their own agenda to focus on the needs of their child/children. This view was supported by the resident parents, who reported that mediation sessions did not help relieve the tension immediately after separation or result in lasting changes to their relationship: ‘It was just somewhere to let your anger out’ (Resident mother, Area 4).

The matter of non-attendance at mediation sessions, which inevitably led to delays when cases went litigation, was mentioned by both sets of parents. Non-resident parents felt that their former partner had little to lose by not attending, or ceasing to attend, mediation as it was the non-resident parent who had a greater vested interest in mediation working to improve contact and relations with their child/children and former partner. Previous research has suggested that mediation favours resident mothers and this was the perception of non-resident fathers in the sample, though in their cases it was predominantly the unwillingness of the resident mothers to engage with or continue using the service which they found particularly frustrating. However, some resident parents also reported that their former partner failed to attend or engage in mediation sessions and a number would have liked attendance to have been a compulsory requirement.

Mediation, either through Cafcass or independently in the voluntary sector, was most frequently identified by non-resident parents as potentially the most helpful service, but for those who used it, the reality was a disappointment. It was suggested by several non-resident parents that mediation services should become more child-focused, concentrating on the needs and interests of the children and the responsibility of
separated parents in overcoming adversity and adopting a joint approach to parenting (though in fact that is precisely their remit).

Some professional facilitation in order to get on for the sake of our daughter. Not as a couple, but as partners, as parents to raise a child. I think that would be really, really helpful. But both parties have to be willing. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

One resident mother suggested that mediation would be more effective if it were longer-term, available at different stages after the separation (as it is in the voluntary sector) and also linked to other services such as parenting courses:

Practical things of sorting out the disagreements between you, and some sort of little parenting course attached where you could iron out the difficulties. (Resident mother, Area 2).

Cafcass
Where disputed residence or contact cases had progressed to court and Cafcass had become involved, their level of engagement was typically not well regarded. The prevailing view among non-resident parents was that while the service might be founded on good intentions, in practice it was not adequately equipped (in terms of resources and professionals) to do the job expected of it:

I think Cafcass had good intentions, but they aren’t equipped to do the job in terms of time, in terms of resources. There is no way that you can get a good handle on a circumstantial situation, based on an hour-long interview. And then to write a report three months, four months, five months after that, making recommendations about care … he (Cafcass officer) didn’t know enough about our circumstances to justify the recommendations he was making. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

The majority of non-resident parents felt that Cafcass was not in a position to make a professional recommendation to the courts after only brief contact with each parent over a relatively long period of time.

Well we had this guy from Cafcass, but in about twelve months we’ve only seen him twice, and he was supposed to do a report for the court. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

I think that they need more resources. They need more time. They need to actually seek some form of independent verification on what is being said in their meetings. Because sometimes they just take word for word what people have said and repeat what they’ve said. And they don’t analyse that, or verify any of that. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

This viewpoint was reiterated by the resident parents who expressed frustration that the courts relied so heavily on Cafcass. A number of resident parents felt that Cafcass officers misjudged the family situation and this directly impacted on the court outcome: ‘I’m disappointed with the courts completely relying on what Cafcass say’ (Resident mother, Area 2). Similarly a number of respondents reported making repeat telephone
calls to Cafcass officers to try to speak to their assigned officer, but never receiving a call in return.

Both non-resident and resident parents also expressed dissatisfaction with the delays from Cafcass. Waiting for the Cafcass report frequently delayed court hearings, to the extent that court appearances were postponed for periods of a few months, which was extremely difficult for those non-resident parents being denied contact with their children by the resident parent.

Once he [Cafcass officer] was involved he was excellent, but he should have done it sooner and quicker … you’re waiting for an appointment before you can go to court. (Resident mother, Area 1).

Another resident parent reported difficulties in inter-agency working and communications between Cafcass and social services, which exacerbated delays in court proceedings.

Only one child – a girl aged 16 from Area 1 – had had contact with Cafcass in the form of both face-to-face and telephone interviews with a Cafcass officer. The child found Cafcass helpful and especially appreciated having the opportunity to write her concerns and feelings in a letter to the court.

From the non-resident parents’ interviews, it was suggested that Cafcass should be externally regulated and monitored in some way, particularly given that in cases where there was considerable disappointment in the service, there was also a reluctance to submit formal complaints against individual assigned officers, because of the concern that this would then prejudice any future input from the service.

So I was actually thinking about putting in a formal complaint about this. But if I did have to go to court again, would it prejudice my case? (Non-resident father, Area 2)

Parents felt that there should be less reliance on Cafcass reports in court proceedings and that reporting officers should spend considerably more time with each family. Some thought that ideally the service might also be combined with other forms of support, such as counselling or information, advice and guidance.

The CSA

The CSA was not well regarded by all the non-resident parents who had had experience of it. Respondents reported that the system was highly bureaucratic which led to frustration and, in some cases, to actual distress among non-resident parents. The primary sources of complaint focused on over-charging, under-charging, loss of paperwork, and the length of time for mistakes or cases to be resolved.

They took nine, ten months to sort it out. You know, I’d filled in three lots of forms, of which they lost two sets. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

One respondent reported that the amount of child support being taken from him left him unable to afford to live, and as a result of over-charging he developed a significant debt to the CSA which he could not afford to pay. Only the intervention of his local MP led the CSA to reverse its decision to prosecute him and to review his overall rate of contribution.
I owed them £28,000 right, but then they just decided to start taking it off your wages at £260 a week...I had to sell the house cos I panicked... I wouldn’t mind 15% of my wages, but they were taking like 90% of my wages at one point.

(Non-resident father, Area 2)

The CSA was also problematic for a number of resident mothers, who experienced delays in receiving payments and found the organisation’s approach too heavy-handed. The formal letters demanding payment from a former partner caused unnecessary tension between separated parents. Several resident parents reported delays in receiving payments from the CSA and this led to unnecessary antagonism with their former partner. However, financial difficulties were reported by a number of resident parents, and a third of those interviewed were concerned that their former partner did not pay any or sufficient child support. Both the non-resident and resident parents interviewed felt that if possible, and particularly if the relationship between the parties was reasonable and civil, it was preferable to arrange maintenance payments independently of the CSA.

Contact Centres
None of the non-resident parents and only two resident parents had had experience of contact centres. One resident father had a positive experience with the first contact centre used, which had a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, outside spaces for the children to play, and personable staff. However, he had a negative experience at the second contact centre used: the atmosphere was unfriendly and cold which had a negative effect on the children (Resident father, Area 5). Another resident parent stopped using contact centres as she wanted to avoid any communication with her violent ex-husband and found the burden of transporting her daughter to the centres problematical (Resident mother, Area 2).

Summary

- The use of mediation and early intervention services appeared to promise more than it delivered for both non-resident and resident parents – it did not help reduce antagonism or promote agreements.
- Non-attendance of mediation services was a problem for both sets of parents, who each reported that their partner’s failure to attend the service or engage in the sessions left it with no possibility of success.
- It was suggested that mediation should concentrate on the needs of children and the responsibility of separated parents to adopt a shared approach to parenting, notwithstanding that this is what it is designed to do.
- Similarly, it was suggested that mediation should be linked to some form of parenting support, to help parents and encourage them to focus on their children’s interests rather than their own anger.
- Cafcass was not well regarded by the families interviewed: it was seen as under-resourced, which resulted in delays in engagement and report-writing which in turn led to the postponement of court hearings. This was particularly difficult for those non-resident parents being denied contact with their children.
- Parents also felt that Cafcass workers were unable to spend adequate time with each family to understand their specific situation and that they were not in a position to make professional recommendations to the courts.
• It was suggested that Cafcass should be externally monitored and regulated so that parents who wished to complain could do so without this affecting any future service provision.

• The CSA had been a cause of distress to both resident and non-resident parents who had experienced it. It was seen as inefficient, bureaucratic and draconian and its intervention could cause distress to both parties.

• A third of the resident mothers interviewed were concerned that their partners did not pay any or sufficient child support.

4.3.4. Statutory services

Schools

Many of the non-resident parents felt that more could be done by the education system to promote the positive involvement of non-resident parents in their children’s lives. It was suggested that schools typically favour the resident parent by treating them as the sole parent with respect to provision of information and taking instruction, without recourse to the non-resident parent’s views. However, non-resident parents argued that if they had parental responsibility, then they should receive all information about their children’s performance and behaviour, and be invited to parents’ evenings and school activities such as sports days.

I’ve had to actually force the issue with the school to ask if I can be privy to information such as school reports, holidays, etc… They in turn got in touch with my ex-wife… I think schools should be more active with fathers where the relationship has broken down or the marriage has broken down….I don’t feel that the father is considered as much as he should be. The school only sends me a report of when school meetings are, parents’ teachers’ meeting but I don’t receive any information about sports days, open days at the school. (Non-resident father, Area 6)

It appeared that, where there was hostility from the resident parent towards the non-resident parent, the school would be guided by the wishes of the resident parent even if both had parental responsibility. In one case, the resident parent had unilaterally changed the child’s surname. On discovering this, the non-resident parent contacted the school with a request that the name be changed back, as it had been illegally altered, but the school refused:

I went to see school and I’ve said, you know, I’ve shown them the court order saying his name’s got to change back, and she said there’s nothing they can do unless the mother goes in and tells them to. (Non-resident father, Area 1)

Resident parents confirmed that they were significantly more involved in their children’s education than the non-resident parent. This included making key decisions, such as choice of schools, attending parents’ evenings, and being in regular communication with school staff. School reports tended to be sent to the resident parent only rather than to both parents. In the few cases where the non-resident parent did receive reports directly from the school, this was only initiated after a specific request from the non-resident parent.
The involvement of non-resident parents with their children’s school varied considerably depending on the family scenario of those interviewed. In situations where there was acrimony or ongoing conflict between the separated parents, the resident parent generally felt supported by the school and the non-resident parent frequently felt alienated. For example, in several antagonistic cases the school’s policy of not allowing children to leave the school premises with another adult without the resident mother’s prior permission, helped enforce court orders, such as restraining orders. In contrast, the majority of non-resident fathers felt frustrated that the schools did not recognise court orders or readily assist in providing information about their children. In a minority of family scenarios the non-resident parent was well-connected with the school: one non-resident father was involved in transporting the children to and from school every day and regularly attended parents’ evenings, and in another case the resident mother felt that joint parenting decisions around education were particularly important: ‘When it comes to the children’s schooling, we always work together and tend to back each other up’ (Resident mother, Area 4). However, this was due to more positive relations and communication between the parents, rather than the school actively encouraging the involvement of both parents.

In the majority of cases, the schools did not offer specific services to separated children and their families. It was only in more acrimonious cases where the family separation was having a noticeable effect on the children at school, or after a specific request by individual parents, that the schools became involved. Four children had accessed school counselling services to help them cope with feelings of anxiety, depression or anger their parents separation following their parents’ separation. In all these cases the resident mothers felt that the school counselling services had had a positive impact on their children: ‘The school counsellor helped him get through a lot…..he was getting really aggressive at school’ (Resident mother, Area 1).

From the children’s perspective, school counselling services proved very helpful. One 14 year-old from Area 6 felt that ‘it does help because it gets it all off your chest... it’s like a weight off you.’ In terms of process, the main advantages were the service’s accessibility (in school), and the freedom of children to choose when they needed to discuss difficult issues: ‘I had a choice to see her twice a week or once a week and I told everything and she helped me loads’. The same girl had also had contact with a voluntary service counsellor but did not like the methods used by the worker, who tended to push her to speak about problems/topics she felt uncomfortable discussing. In comparison, the girl valued having greater choice and flexibility about when to visit and what to discuss with the school counsellor. However, on the basis of our (albeit limited) evidence, school counselling appeared to be a crisis intervention, rather than a long-term support service.

It would appear that greater awareness of potential sources of support would be helpful to children: one girl reported that she did not know who to tell about her father’s violence towards her mother. School staff are probably best placed to help children and young people (assuming that they do attend school) as they have the most frequent and regular contact. However, they appeared on the whole to be unaware, or not made aware, of young people’s personal circumstances and consequently did not always refer them to counselling services (where they existed). A 16 year-old girl (Area 1) who had used the school service pointed out that:
It would be helpful if people in schools were more aware of counsellors and stuff… and [you] could ask to see them, or if the school is more aware of things that were going on.

This was also emphasised by the resident parents who felt that schools should play a central role in providing information on locally available services for separating or separated families. However, this would be unlikely to benefit non-resident fathers who have more limited contact with schools. The most urgent priority for non-resident fathers was that schools should involve them more in their children’s education.

**Housing**

For both sets of parents, temporary housing with relatives was common after separation, though only one non-resident father, who had financial difficulties, continued to live with his parents on a long-term basis. The resident parents had significantly greater contact with housing services than non-resident parents, and they were more likely to be allocated accommodation. The minority of non-resident parents living in social housing tended to have additional difficulties, such as mental health needs or a history of substance misuse.

The location of allocated housing was an important factor for both resident and non-resident parents, in particular the proximity to their children. Several parents requested to be housed near their former partner to make contact with the children easier. However, these requests were not always granted, as described by one resident mother who felt the resulting physical distance between the parents had had a significant impact on her son and his relationship with his father:

*He [non-resident father] would have stayed nearby. Had he been a resident in the area, probably a lot of things would be different to how they are now. I suppose part of it is ‘we don’t want to give single fathers a flat because it’ll encourage break-ups’, but certainly in terms of our life, it made it much more difficult.* (Resident mother, Area 3).

This perspective was also emphasised in the children’s interviews where several of the older children appreciated living near (particularly within walking distance) of their non-resident parents. This enabled more frequent contact and also afforded greater flexibility and choice about when and for how long to visit the other parent.

Delays in accessing council housing after separation were a problem for a number of resident mothers. As these mothers often had temporary accommodation with other family members, they felt that the council did not prioritise their urgent housing needs:

*I had to wait six months for the council to re-house me…they didn’t rush because I had a roof over my head. It was stressful. I just wanted to get on with my life and close a chapter but the council was stopping me.* (Resident mother, Area 4).

In another case, because the resident mother chose to leave the family home rather than being forced to leave, she experienced delays in accessing housing, even though this was a case of domestic abuse. In a second case of domestic violence, the resident mother was, at the time of the interview, requesting a council house further away from her ex-husband, who was violent and had frequently threatened her at the house. She had only been prioritised for housing after she enlisted the support of a local councillor.
and submitted a medical form that fast-tracked her application. The housing system appears to be reliant on individuals pressing for priority or investigating methods to fast-track their own cases, and many vulnerable people may be unaware of these methods or unable to take the initiative.

In several cases respondents experienced a lack of flexibility in the housing allocated by authorities: a typical case was a non-resident father finding it difficult to gain a two bedroom flat so that his son could have overnight contact. In another case, there was a very large age gap between the resident mother’s children, but they had to share a bedroom.

**Police**

The few resident parents who had liaised with the police all reported a lack of inter-agency working and communication. They felt that the police did not engage sufficiently with other agencies (especially social services) prior to visiting a family, and had a lack of awareness about the history and context of family situations. One resident father found that some police officers did not have sufficient knowledge of the family law on residence orders to be able to act appropriately and a resident mother felt that the police did not fully research the family situation with social services before acting on a complaint. When her former partner, a drug addict, made false allegations of child abuse against her, the police adopted a heavy-handed approach:

*Why don’t they research it first? The police are so scared of not acting on something and with the high media cases of things they haven’t acted upon…yet why don’t they check, like with the schools or the children’s services?* (Resident mother, Area 1).

The resident mothers who had contact with the police experienced a lack of understanding from male police officers, particularly when responding to situations of domestic violence or harassment from former partners. One resident mother described a ‘culture of disbelief’ and found herself being blamed by police officers when her former partner became violent: ‘the night he came down with a knife, they said “you shouldn’t be meeting him then, should you?”’ (Resident mother, Area 1). She was angry over the lenient sentencing of her violent former partner and the lack of concern she encountered when reporting domestic abuse violence to the police. Another resident mother reported that some male police officers held assumptions about the family separation, as they automatically assumed she was denying her former partner access to his son:

*They were totally males, totally on the father’s side - a poor father who couldn’t see his son - no matter how many times you told them he’s never been denied access to his son. … I would have preferred a female police officer rather than a male…I felt very bullied and ganged up on by a male attitude to things.* (Resident mother, Area 1)

**Social Services**

Non-resident parents were particularly averse to coming into contact with social services as they believed that any engagement with them carried stigma, in terms of bad parenting or being under investigation. Overall, there was a clear sense of wariness and cynicism in relation to this service, with the common view that if social workers became involved the situation could be made worse.
Unfortunately, if you are going there to seek help... it ends up being something against you. You eventually lose. (Non-resident father, Area 3)

Social services' involvement was also a source of anxiety rather than support, for several resident parents. One resident mother repeatedly requested a full psychological assessment for her son who was displaying severe mental health needs, but experienced substantial delays: social services focused on her parenting skills ad those of her former husband rather than acknowledging their need for intensive psychological support. It was only after her son started to display violent and sexual behaviour towards other children that his psychological needs were seriously addressed. Another resident parent was maliciously reported to social services by her former partner and found the subsequent engagement with them extremely stressful.

However, two resident parents found social services helpful and supportive. One resident mother, who suffered with depression, was offered a scheme called 'sponsor a child' which paid for a child-minder to take her daughter to school every morning, which she found very helpful. However, she initially encountered difficulties in accessing the scheme: because she did not have a physical disability she was not prioritised and only gained access after pressing her GP to support her request. A resident father found the staff in social services a 'tremendous help' because they were understanding and sympathetic to his difficult family circumstances and offered regular practical support.

High staff turnover within social services was a key issue for several resident parents interviewed, which impacted on the quality of support they received. Concerns over low funding contributed to the reluctance to approach social services for support, as described by one non-resident father: 'I have no faith in social services, none whatsoever. I feel that the whole social services system is just totally under-funded'. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

Variations in funding between regions was identified as a contributing factor by those who had experienced the service in different locations.

The services can be so different in one area, from one area to the next. It's completely different...you know the trouble down here is money and resources. (Resident father, Area 5)

Health services

As already mentioned, a number of parents reported mental health difficulties following separation but only a minority stated that these had brought them into contact with medical or counselling services. It was the individuals with particularly severe mental health needs who had most contact with GPs or psychiatric services. Responses varied when assessing the extent to which these medical services met their needs and supported them—from anger directed at GPs for ignoring their requests for help or offering them very little to alleviate symptoms – to positive comments on the counselling received. Though the non-resident fathers gave an indication of their mental health difficulties, they did not discuss these problems as openly or in the same depth as the resident mothers.

Nearly half of the resident parents interviewed experienced mental health problems and six felt that this resulted directly from their relationship breakdown. However, only three individuals used counselling services to help them cope. This was due either to lack of
awareness of services or to the practical necessity of having to ‘work through’ their depression in order to function as a parent. One mother did not find the counselling helpful as she found it over-assertive and not sensitive enough to her situation. The other two mothers found their service extremely beneficial, though they would have liked more input.

Those two hours every week were really good, but it’s not enough. If somebody’s leaving you, you’ve got twenty-four hours a day on your own with a small baby.

(Resident mother, Area 3).

Most resident parents gained significant support from close family members and friends, by having someone to listen to their problems and also to help practically with childcare.

Four children accessed counselling services predominantly through their school. In all these cases, both the resident parent and the child felt that counselling had a positive impact, although they felt that in-school counselling services should be more widely available:

If they had something in school for the children… [someone] who finds out if there any issues going on with the parents, then they can send them along and let them chat and things. (Resident mother, Area 6).

Those children who did use school counselling services felt that these services were not widely publicised in school, and that most children were very unsure about where they could go for help. The majority of children interviewed had very limited contact or awareness of support services. Some resident parents also expressed concern that pre-school children did not have access to counselling services as they were considered too young. One mother, who had experienced domestic abuse, felt that it was important to ensure all children had access to counselling services as soon as possible to prevent further problems later in childhood:

Once they get to the age of even one, they know if mummy’s being hit. I think counselling services should accept children of any age…even a toddler can show their emotions through play. (Resident mother, Area 1).

Health visitors

The resident parents interviewed found the health visitor service extremely helpful as it offered them a range of support including practical advice on parenting skills and childcare, health-checks, regular informal counselling, someone to listen to their difficulties, and signposting to other services. The resident fathers found this service particularly beneficial as it offered them accessible one-to-one support on parenting. However, all of the resident parents interviewed would have appreciated this service to be more frequent and longer term: only three individuals in the sample had regular and sustained contact with health visitors.

Summary

- The perception among non-resident parents was that schools typically favour the resident parent with respect to provision of information and taking instruction without consideration of their own views.
In the majority of cases, the schools relied on parents to let them know about changes in the child’s home life. The school counselling service would typically only become involved at the specific request of a parent or when the family separation was having a noticeable effect on the child in school.

The small number of children (from the most acrimonious cases) who had access to school counselling services all found it very beneficial.

Greater awareness of potential sources of support (including the school’s pastoral or counselling service) would be helpful to children. School staff are probably best placed to help as they have the most regular and frequent contact.

In terms of housing, locating non-resident parents near to their children was seen as helpful in promoting good relationships and aiding contact arrangements.

There was a lack of flexibility in the housing allocated by authorities to take account of different family circumstances: several non-resident fathers found it difficult to gain two bedroom flats so their children could stay overnight.

Delay in accessing social housing following separation was a problem for a number of resident mothers, especially when they had temporary accommodation with family members.

The minority of resident parents who had contact with the police reported a lack of inter-agency working and communication. They did not engage sufficiently with other agencies prior to visiting a family, they lacked awareness of the background context of family situations and they did not have sufficient knowledge of family law.

The resident mothers who had contact with the police found male officers to be insensitive in responding to cases of domestic violence or harassment from former partners.

Engagement with a social services department was seen to carry the stigma of being a bad parent and most parents avoided contact where possible.

High staff turnover and variation in funding between regions impacted on the quality of support received by those families in contact with social services departments.

Though a number of non-resident and resident parents reported mental health difficulties, only a small minority had contact with medical or counselling services. Equally, very few children accessed counselling but those who did found it very beneficial.

All the resident parents who had access to health visitors (in particular the resident fathers) found this service extremely helpful as it offered a variety of support, including one-to-one advice on parenting skills, health checks, a listening service and signposting to other agencies.

4.3.5. Voluntary sector provision

Awareness of voluntary sector services

Most of the non-resident fathers interviewed had low awareness of the support and information services that existed and only a small minority reported using voluntary sector services. While solicitors and the courts, the Citizens Advice Bureau and mediation were typically identified and associated with separation and child contact (even if not used), there was relative ignorance of any other sources of support or information. Similarly, the majority of resident parents were unaware of voluntary sector
support services and how to access them: ‘No, there was never really anything available. You used to hear about people going to Relate but I never knew where they were’ (Resident mother, Area 6). The minority of parents who did access these services, did so after word-of-mouth recommendations from friends or family and not from seeing advertisements, leaflets or as a result of onward referral. Only one child interviewed had contact with a voluntary service counsellor. However, even though awareness of voluntary services was low across all the interviews, the resident mothers appeared slightly better at seeking additional sources of support and had significantly greater contact with service providers than non-resident fathers.

Information, advice and guidance
For those few parents who did access voluntary sector provision, they primarily gained information, advice and guidance. The non-resident fathers accessed the following voluntary organisations: the Association of Shared Parenting, Fathers for Justice; and Families need Fathers. All of these services were rated highly both in terms of helping them to deal with emotional issues and providing them with useful information. One non-resident parent stated that, in his view, the most useful support and advice available for non-resident parents came from the voluntary rather than the public sector.

Voluntary organisations [are the best], like ASP, like Fathers’ for Justice, like Families Need Fathers. Because these interest groups, collectively, have provided me with far more information and support, than any governmental organisation I’ve ever come across. (Non-resident father, Area 2)

The minority of resident parents who accessed voluntary sector information, advice and guidance support primarily used Relate and services targeted at women who had experienced domestic abuse. These organisations gave information, advice and counselling, provided assistance in finding solicitors and securing legal aid, offered in-house counselling services and referred women and children to other services.

Parenting help-lines
A small minority of parents used telephone help-lines for emotional support after separation. Interestingly the non-resident fathers found this service much more beneficial and effective than the resident mothers:

I used to get a lot of emotional help from an organisation called Parentline Plus who are available on the phone. And I used to keep in touch with them, just to help get me through the bereavement and the loss of not actually being able to see my daughter... They were there. They were an emotional support really. They made me value my feelings and accept my feelings... I was in a state of shock and denial: it was the very early stage of loss for me. (Non-resident father, Area 2).

This implies that it offered useful short-term support for some non-resident fathers (particularly immediately after separation), and suggests that fathers found it helpful to request assistance remotely over the telephone. In comparison, the few resident mothers who had contact with or awareness of parenting help-lines felt they were not particularly helpful as they only offered short-term emotional support and no practical solutions.
The parent help-line, you could have phoned up crying and upset, and they may have been really understanding...but how would it have actually altered what was happening to you day-to-day? (Resident mother, Area 1).

Summary

- There was very low awareness and limited contact with voluntary sector provision among the separated families, but resident mothers were better at seeking additional support than non-resident fathers.
- Information advice and guidance was the prime type of support gained from the voluntary sector, and was rated highly, albeit accessed by only a small minority of parents.
- Parenting help-lines were more beneficial for non-resident fathers than resident mothers, suggesting that fathers preferred to request help remotely rather than face-to-face.

4.3.6. Additional Needs

Child-focused provision
Throughout the interviews both non-resident and resident parents felt that service provision should be more focused on the needs of the child rather than the competing demands of separated parents. This was particularly apparent in discussions around the legal system, contact arrangements and mediation services. There was a suggestion that a more holistic family approach would encourage separated parents to focus on their children’s needs rather than their own anger and bitterness of separation. This is a difficult proposition as each parent might claim to understand the needs of the children better than the other.

Parenting support and advice
A number of resident mothers felt that parenting support and advice would be beneficial to both resident parents and non-resident parents. Health visitors, parenting courses that help build relationships between non-resident fathers and children, and outreach visits providing one-to-one advice on parenting skills were suggested.

Several resident mothers felt that their former partner did not engage sufficiently with the children or that they needed help in adapting to the changed parenting role:

They’ve gone from spending all their time with their kids to every other week… some sort of service that helps build the relationship between the father and the kids. (Resident mother, Area 1).

Two mothers felt that the parenting skills of their former husband were low, as even before separation they had limited involvement with the children:

I don’t think he understands what it [parenting] means… I think he’s really ignorant really… he doesn’t know how to do it and doesn’t understand the concept. (Resident mother, Area 2).

One resident mother felt that it was important that parenting lessons to non-resident fathers were given by men. In this situation she felt it would be easier for her former
husband to accept parenting advice from another man, in particular because he was aggressive and had a low opinion of women:

*It's easier for them to just be male... I think only men can talk to men...I don't think it would have gone well from hearing it from another woman. He doesn't respect women.* (Resident mother, Area 2).

None of the non-resident parents interviewed explicitly identified parenting services as a desired area of support, although differences in parenting approaches were a common source of tension between the separated parents. The majority of non-resident parents wanted greater parental involvement with their children, (including in day-to-day childcare and decision-making). However, their concern was around contact rather than improving their parenting skills. When discussing contact issues a number of non-resident fathers suggested having 'parenting plans' attached to court proceedings or linked to mediation services, which encouraged both parents to focus on their child's needs. The blocking of contact by a former partner was perceived by several non-resident fathers as an example of poor parenting that ignored the needs of the child.

**Support groups/ drop-in centres**

Several resident parents felt that support groups or drop-in centres for separated parents would be helpful. This gives parents the opportunity to meet others in a similar situation, a space for their children to play, social interaction in a relaxed atmosphere, and a source of information and advice on available services:

*You can get advice on how to cope with this and that. What are the good ways. Other people's ideas on how to cope with a situation.* (Resident mother, Area 3).

Sure Start children’s centres were seen as very beneficial for parents of pre-school children, and one resident mother found Newpin (now part of the Family Welfare Association) in Area 3 particularly helpful. The service catered not only for the child’s needs but also the mother’s: it was a drop-in centre open each weekday and also during school holidays, where single mothers could have coffee, meet other mothers, and gain information and advice from staff in an informal and relaxed atmosphere.

The non-resident fathers interviewed had no comment regarding potential support groups or drop-in-centres: this could be due either to the generally low awareness among fathers about available services, or to the fact that this particular type of service is perceived as more female-oriented.

Several parents felt that special youth clubs attached to schools or children’s centres would be beneficial to children from separated families. This would afford them the opportunity to meet other children also experiencing separation and participate in enjoyable activities, providing a diversion from their family situation.

**Summary**

- Parents felt that a service offering a more holistic family approach would encourage them to overcome their own bitterness around separation and focus on their children’s interests.
- Services that encouraged the long-term development of more communication between separated parents would be beneficial: poor communication between
parents directly impacts on contact and the well-being of children from separated families.

- The resident parents felt that parenting courses for non-resident fathers would help them build relationships with their children. It was suggested that male-only classes would be more effective than mixed sessions.
- Non-resident fathers were primarily concerned with contact and their rights as parents rather than their own parenting skills.
- Female resident parents felt that support groups or drop-in centres would be helpful for information, advice and guidance. The men in the sample expressed no interest in this type of support.
- Some parents though that their children might benefit from participation in groups activities with other children from separated families, which would allow them to meet other children in similar circumstances and distract them from tensions in the family.

4.4. Case Studies

Below we present four case studies which illustrate the various scenarios of separated families, categorised as acrimonious, civil but unfriendly, positive co-parenting, and dual families. These case studies reveal the complexity of separated families and the divergent approaches to parenting and contact after separation. Even within each family scenario there were a number of complexities and contradictions, such as differences in perception between family members about the separation.

4.4.1. Acrimonious

In this case-study, there is a 15 year-old girl living with her mother and younger sister who is seven years old. Their parents separated six years ago, when the youngest girl was still a baby. The non-resident father has re-married and now lives with his new wife, step-daughter and son.

Child

The girl has irregular contact with her father and is unhappy with the visiting arrangements. She feels that her father does not spend enough time with her and her younger sister, as opposed to his new wife and family. The girl feels that her father is disinterested and ‘not really bothered’ about seeing her or her sister:

*I'd like him to spend more time with me... one Sunday like a week, he thinks it's enough. But it isn't, because I mean his family's got him like all week.*

The girl describes her relationship with her father as difficult and tense. She finds it hard to speak to him openly about her feelings and they often have arguments. There is a tense relationship between herself and her father’s new wife. The new wife causes strain between her and her father, as the new wife does not like the visits. The girl feels an unwanted addition to her father’s new life and marriage. She is ‘stuck in the middle’ when arguments emerge between her separated parents, often is drawn into these arguments and compelled to defend her mother. She would really like to spend more time with her father, including going on holiday or weekend outings, but thinks that he always prioritises his new family.
In terms of services, the girl has found her school supportive and sympathetic to her family difficulties. She has had a number of discussions with the school counsellor/nurse and found it helpful to share her feelings and gain advice: ‘I do think it’s best to talk to someone, ‘cos it helps you get it all out of your system’. The teachers are sensitive and aware of the problem and have sent her home when she is particularly distressed. The girl is not aware of any other services that could help her, and would instead turn to her resident mother or aunt for support. She gains a significant amount of support from friends, and finds the advice from a friend who also has separated parents particularly helpful.

Non-resident father

The father feels that court contact orders are constantly broken by the mother and that he has no stability in visiting arrangements. He describes how the mother repeatedly blocks contact and prevents him from seeing his daughters. There is a sense of impotence and lack of control over contact:

One week I can have them and then I can't. Then I can have them then I can't. I've gone to court. I've got contact orders, it doesn't make any difference.’

He sees the blocking of access as malicious: he feels his ex-wife has never adjusted to their marriage breakdown and is particularly hostile towards his new wife. For him, the mother is trying to transfer her acrimony to the girls and involve them in the arguments in order ‘to turn them against us’. He feels that the mother’s animosity and unwillingness to move on is preventing the girls from adjusting to the separation. The girls are confused and emotionally unsettled, and wrongly drawn into arguments, which leaves them wondering which parent to believe and support. The father has limited input into key parenting decisions and no involvement in the girls’ education. He is under financial strain after the legal costs of securing court orders.

The father used mediation services a year after separation, but felt that they did not have any lasting impact. He describes how the mother was very reasonable during the sessions but outside the mediation meetings she continued to block contact. The mother suggested a second attempt at mediation services six months ago: he refused as he felt this would not lead to any lasting changes. The father expresses how court services have very little power to enforce agreed contact orders. In the legal system, he feels that the burden of trying to restore contact with children and the associated financial strain always fall more heavily on the non-resident father. The lack of enforcement powers by the court has caused the father to become disillusioned with the legal system. Additionally, the father feels frustrated that he has no contact with his daughters’ schools and that he does not receive any school reports directly.

Resident mother

The mother feels that her older daughter is still very distressed about the separation and this is negatively affecting her education. Her daughter is often very tearful and angry and on a number of occasions she has left school early because she was so upset. The mother blames her ex-husband for creating this anguish, describing how he focuses on his new family and avoids spending time with his daughters from his previous marriage:

All I want off him is for him to be right with the children and to spend a few hours on his own with the children, because at the end of the day they need their dad.
She feels that his new wife encourages him not to see his daughters and makes them feel unwanted whenever they visit. Their father adopted the daughter of his new wife, which has caused significant upset for the mother and the girls, especially in terms of sharing the same surname. The mother feels her ex-husband only initiates sporadic contact with his daughters and he has currently stopped seeing them. He is not involved in the girls’ education and makes no effort to restore contact or show interest in their education. Communication between the separated parents is acrimonious and very hostile, and she feels that this situation will become worse with time.

Her older daughter has been seeing a school counsellor which has helped to cope with her emotions regarding the separation. The mother feels that this service should be more regular and widespread, with a more proactive approach in finding out if a child’s parents are separating. The younger daughter has been visiting the doctor regularly as she has been suffering from anxiety attacks. The separated parents have used mediation services, but after three sessions the father refused to go. The mother would like more support services for single parents after separation, in helping them cope with both their own and their children’s emotions. She suggests that local support groups for separated parents would be helpful, where parents can share advice with others in a similar situation.

4.4.2. Civil but unfriendly (originally acrimonious)

The teenage boy in this case study is 14, and his parents separated twelve years ago when he was just one and a half years old. Since the separation, he has always lived with his mother. The boy’s father has re-married, but has not had any additional children from this second marriage.

Child

The boy sees his father every Saturday and occasionally stays overnight on a Friday. He would like to see his father more often but finds this difficult with homework and exams. As he has become older, the boy’s time has become more limited due to school pressures, and this affects the amount of time he can spend with his father. The boy looks forward to seeing his father and spending time with him. When visiting his father they rarely watch television and instead go to the city centre, out on day trips or just spend time talking together. He never brings his homework when visiting his father, and rather focuses on relaxing and enjoyable activities when visiting. The boy gets on well with his father’s second wife and has, over time, adjusted well to the re-marriage which occurred ten years ago. His father does not see his school reports as they are sent to his resident mother only.

The boy is unaware of any services to help children from separated families, and is sceptical that services such as school counsellors could help in any practical way: ‘there’s nobody else that can do something about it’. If he did have a problem about the separation, he would speak to his resident mother ‘as she would be the one that could make a difference’. The boy would not speak to his close friends if he had a problem, as it was not usual to share intimate feelings with them.

Non-resident father

Though contact with his son has now become regular, in the past access was frequently blocked by the mother: ‘I found it really difficult in the beginning to get any contact without confrontation’. Even though weekly contact visits and occasional holidays have
now been established, the father still feels very restricted and that he lacks control over seeing his son. Communication with his former wife is strained and he feels uninvolved in his son’s life apart from the weekly contact visits: ‘it’s difficult when you’re away from your child for six days a week’. He feels that his ex-wife is possessive and refuses to give him any information about his son’s education or well-being, or involve him in key parenting decisions. The father’s new wife was a particular source of tension, and his ex-wife often prevented his son from visiting when the new wife was present: ‘I found it quite controlling. She was trying to control where I could take him, where I could spend time with him’. He feels that his son gets on very well with his new wife and that they have a close relationship. The son found the separation very difficult at first, but now he is older he has become more accustomed to the situation. After the separation, the father developed mental health issues and found it difficult to cope with his new circumstances. He felt that his life had broken down and describes feeling bereaved for his child.

The father repeatedly emphasised that he felt isolated and unsupported by services after his marriage broke down: ‘I felt like my hands were tied and I wasn’t offered any advice from anywhere’. The Citizens Advice Bureau recommended mediation services, but this was rejected by his ex-wife. He felt unsupported by his solicitor who stated it was very unlikely he would gain further contact with his son, even though this was successfully achieved after court proceedings. His mental health difficulties and stress immediately after the separation led him to sign residence documents that he later regretted: “I felt under so much pressure at the time that I just signed it away. Like I was just signing away my life. I just signed away my child.”

The father felt alone and isolated in the legal proceedings: ‘I didn’t know where to turn and I didn’t feel that there was any help and felt pretty much alone’. He suggests there should be much greater information and publicity on services, to help reach those fathers who need support. He also feels that separating couples with children should be compelled to use mediation services (unless it is a case of violence or substance misuse). During separation, the interests of the child are often overlooked, due to the hostile communication and competing demands of parents. Additionally, the father felt that schools should be more proactive in engaging separated fathers in their child’s education.

Resident mother
Immediately after the separation there was acrimony between the parents and their son was caught between the conflicting positions of each parent. However, after time they realised this was potentially damaging to their child, and both agreed not to involve him in any arguments: ‘Because, I mean our son’s in the middle and I don’t know how later on it’s gonna affect him’. Immediately after their marriage broke down, she describes how her ex-husband found it extremely difficult to accept: ‘he couldn’t accept that I didn’t want him…and he used to drive around the flat at night’. A few months after their separation, her ex-husband met another woman, which was extremely difficult for the mother to cope with. They went through court proceedings as the father wanted to have contact twice a week. However, after he gained the court order he never initiated seeing his son more than once a week. As their son has got older, their relationship has improved and now there is an established pattern of contact. The mother still feels frustrated that her ex-husband does not pay any maintenance or show any interest in
their son’s education: ‘he’s never been interested… in the open evenings, the parents’ evening’. She describes how the burden of childcare is placed on her and he is uninvolved in the routine and discipline: the son only does fun and enjoyable activities with his father and she feels left with the daily burden of raising the child.

She had very little contact with support services to help deal with her marriage breakdown. Her ex-husband suggested using mediation services but at the time she felt that this would not result in any lasting changes. For a few years her ex-husband did not have a spare bedroom in his council house, which caused problems when their son needed to visit overnight. Eventually, the council provided a two-bedroom house, but this was only after the resident mother agreed to support her ex-husband’s request. She would have found it helpful to receive additional advice on available support services from the solicitor during divorce proceedings:

> When you go to your solicitor, your solicitor knows you’re getting a divorce. There should be leaflets there… but there’s nothing. If there was something in the library… or an advert in our local paper.

4.4.3. Civil but unfriendly

The boy is now 8 years old and his parents separated when he was only ten months. His non-resident father is now living with a new partner and her two girls. The boy’s father also has two older daughters in their twenties from a previous relationship.

Child

The boy sees his father every Tuesday, though slightly prefers staying with his resident mother. He enjoys visiting his father and particularly going on holiday with him, but he is often concerned that he misses out on playing with his friends at home. When spending time with his father they always focus on enjoyable activities, such as going fishing or to the cinema. The boy gets on relatively well with his father’s new partner and family, and was very upset when his step-grandmother died recently. He likes his new step-sisters, though finds it hard to relate to them as they are older girls. The boy is very unhappy at school because ‘absolutely nobody plays with me’ which makes him feel ‘very sad’. His unhappiness at school and with other children is the most worrying concern for the boy at the moment.

The boy would turn to his resident mother and close friends if he wanted to discuss any worries or talk about his parents’ separation. He did not mention approaching any other individuals such as teachers, and did not seem to consider approaching anyone outside his close family and friends.

Non-resident father

The father sees his son every Tuesday for an overnight stay, and more frequently during school holidays. He feels he has a close relationship with his son and tries to tell him regularly how much he loves him. He thought his son found the separation difficult at first and it took him a long time to become used to his father’s new wife. However, his son is now more adjusted to the situation and he gets on very well with the new partner. Mental health issues have been a recurring difficulty for the father, and this was exacerbated by the separation from his wife:
I’ve had depression and paranoia most of my life, but it’s just never been spotted. And then it took the break up of my marriage to just push me over that edge.

The father had a breakdown immediately after the separation and found it extremely difficult to cope with the new situation: ‘It was hard to get through that time…my head was just that much in bits… it was even the pressure of even trying to go outside’. He feels that these mental health difficulties have impacted on the parenting of his son: during the breakdown he had to cancel visits and even now, while he is on anti-depressants, he finds it difficult disciplining his son. Financial pressures are a worry to the father, especially as he is reliant on disability benefit due to his mental health problems and after developing a brain tumour.

The father has had regular contact with a psychiatrist, to help him overcome his breakdown immediately after the separation. He used mediation services with his ex-wife to try to agree contact arrangements, though he often found it hard to control his anger during these meetings because he was under significant mental stress. They did not continue with mediation and eventually reached agreements by themselves. Contact was eventually formalised through court proceedings to make their agreements legally binding.

Resident mother

When they initially separated there was significant tension between the parents and they argued regularly. Due to her ex-husband’s depression and mental health problems, she felt she was being left alone to cope with the baby and also to help him financially:

*He was off sick with depression and in the end it just got to me…I felt why should I go to work and leave the baby at home? I should be the one at home.*

Initially her ex-husband saw their son for two hours a week, but he soon began court proceedings to increase contact. The mother describes how her ex-husband had difficulty controlling his emotions and angered easily during the divorce proceedings. After a time, their relationship stabilised and now a regular pattern of contact has been established. She feels that her son’s contact with his father is extremely important for his well-being:

*He’s at that age now where he likes going, he loves his dad to bits…he gets on real well with his dad…and if he doesn’t see him he will always ring him up.*

According to the mother, the new partner of her ex-husband is a very positive influence on him and has been crucial in helping to establish regular contact patterns: ‘I always think to myself, “if you didn’t have her, he’d go back to the two hours a week thing and wouldn’t have him overnight”… he’s got stability now’.

They initially used mediation services but she found this very unconstructive as the sessions simply became an avenue for her husband to vent his anger. She describes how he has limited contact with the school and has never come to parents’ evenings. The mother has not had any other contact with services and gains most of her support from close family members. She suggested that leaflets on services for separated families should be more available and suggests having publicity in local social services offices.
4.4.4. Positive co-parenting (originally civil but unfriendly)

In this scenario, the boy is 16 years old and has just left school. His parents separated when he was just a baby and he has always lived with his mother and his half-sister who is 14 years old. His father has remarried and has an 11 year-old daughter with his second wife and a step-son of 22, from his new wife’s previous relationship.

**Child**

The boy visits his father every week, usually on a Sunday, and often also goes to visit him spontaneously. Living near his father is very important as it gives him choice and control over visiting arrangements. When the boy was younger, contact with his father was more fixed and systematic, however now he is older he appreciates more flexibility. The boy sees his father’s family very frequently, especially his cousins who went to the same school. He has a good relationship with his step-siblings and feels they are his ‘real brother and sister’. When he was younger he found it hard to adjust to his father’s new wife, but now feels close to her and has a good relationship. He enjoys the company of his father, as they have very similar interests, such as football. Even though they do a number of activities together (including watching football matches, day-trips and going to the pub) it is simply seeing his father and spending time with him that is most important to the boy: ‘it’s enough to be able to see him.’ He appreciates and respects his father’s approach to discipline, in particular, the calm explanation of what he has done wrong rather than becoming angry:

*Telling me what I’ve done wrong… is a lot better than bawling and screaming because you realise then what you have done. And why it’s wrong and everything.*

He is comfortable staying with both his parents, but also sometimes gets bored and restless staying indoors at either parent’s house.

The boy is not aware of services that help children in separated families. Though he has a number of close friends who also have separated parents, he would not discuss intimate feelings about his parents’ separation with them. If he needed to discuss any concerns, he would either approach his resident mother or his non-resident father for advice.

**Non-resident father**

Over time he has developed a positive relationship with his ex-wife and he has regular and flexible contact arrangements with his son. His son feels at home and comfortable staying with him and ‘treats it like his own house’. He visits every Sunday and often drops by during the week. His son is close to his father’s new wife and will visit her even when his father is not at home. The son views his step-siblings ‘as brothers and sisters’ and often helps the 11 year-old with her homework. However, immediately after separation there were tensions with his ex-wife around contact and eventually the father sought court orders: the father wanted a more shared system of childcare and felt that his ex-wife was preventing contact and changing visiting agreements. In particular, the father wanted to be more involved in day-to-day care, such as having his son for multiple nights during the week, for overnight stays, and buying him clothes. After court proceedings a regular pattern of contact was established, albeit limited to only a few hours twice a week. In the years after the separation his relationship with his ex-wife became more positive and developed into a system of co-parenting. This includes
sharing information on his schooling, behaviour and ‘working together’ to share discipline and make key decisions. His ex-wife now regularly visits his house and enjoys talking to his second wife:

She comes up here. Some nights she’ll come up, sit, talk and I’m ready for bed. She’ll just carry on talking to my [second] wife. I just leave them to it.

The father was unaware of any support services for non-resident fathers, and was only in contact with his solicitors and the CSA. For 11 years the father paid a weekly allowance to his ex-wife without any CSA involvement. However during a difficult period for his ex-wife, the CSA gave her recommendations that these payments could be increased. The father found the CSA’s handling of this situation very unhelpful: they immediately assumed that he was not contributing enough, without fully examining his history or financial circumstances. He felt the CSA adopted a confrontational approach and nearly created unnecessary tensions between him and his ex-wife. The father feels that the legal system is unfair, as it tends to favour mothers in terms of contact and custody:

I can’t see why the courts always seem to favour the mothers…when families break down the mothers are left with all the goods. But I know for definite that … the mothers are no better than the fathers… what’s to say the kid wouldn’t be better off with his father?

He would have liked support from an information service after his separation:

Specialists in the field who would offer to come out and see you …[to discuss] about the split, what you’re right and wrong on.. payment to kids and somebody to really talk to.

He emphasised the need for advice from a neutral party, independent from the competing interests of separated parents and their families. Additionally, he felt that there was a lack of information on available support services for separated parents. He felt that there should be accessible information leaflets in public places, and greater advertising of services in newspapers.

Resident mother
Though there were initial tensions between the separated parents, the mother feels that contact patterns have always remained regular. Her relationship with her ex-husband has improved over time and he became very involved in the care and daily life of their son. The mother feels that her ex-husband’s new partner was a positive influence, especially as she had children of a similar age. Their son feels well-integrated into the life of his father’s new family and enjoys spending time with them: ‘there’s a lot of links fostered there, but it’s taken a long time… it didn’t just happen’. She describes her ex-husband as very supportive and key decisions on parenting and discipline are made jointly:

I have to say he was very much a hands-on dad…and we’ve always had a united front… like if our son misbehaved and was grounded.

They help each other with childcare while working, including care of their step-children. She has always felt that regular contact between her son and his father is very important, including during Christmas and key celebrations. She describes an argument with her
new partner about her son spending part of Christmas with her ex-husband: ‘you should respect the fact that he’s got somebody in his life who cares for him’.

The mother feels there is a lack of support services to help families after separation. Though she was aware of a few services such as Relate, she was unsure how to access any available support. She suggests that schools should have a greater role in providing information, support and advice about services to help separating parents: ‘there’s not even information that comes into school’. She found it hard to find affordable housing after the separation, and found the council reluctant to give her a house as she was living with her parents: ‘because I’d got somewhere to stay they won’t look at you’.

4.4.5. Dual families

The girl is 11 years old and lives with her mother and 14 year-old brother. She also has two half-sisters with whom she grew up, but they now live with her non-resident step-father. When her mother and step-father separated after eight years of marriage, they decided that the two older children would live with the mother and the two younger girls would live with their father. In this case-study, the mother and father are both resident and non-resident parents.

Child

There is a shared system of child-care, and the girl spends almost equal time with each of her parents. Though she lives with her mother, she visits her step-father almost every day and he is involved in taking her to and from school. There is a flexible arrangement in terms of contact, which is helped by him living within walking distance from her home. She describes her step-father as her ‘Dad’ and they have a close relationship. The communication between her separated parents is very good and mutually supportive: for example, when the resident mother is under strain she will go to stay with her father, even if this is spontaneous: ‘I knew my mum needed space and with me she couldn’t have that. So I went to my dad’s’. When staying with her father, activities include watching television with him, drama and singing, as he is involved in local amateur dramatics. Though the girl feels very integrated into the life of her step-father, she does not get on as well with her extended step-family (such as step-grandparents), and describes how they treat her differently. The girl has a problem with bullies in the local area who often throw glass bottles at her, and also at school where she tends to play with much younger children. For the girl, bullying is her largest worry at the moment, not the separation of her parents to which she feels relatively well adjusted.

The girl has no awareness of services that help children cope with separation and feels no need to discuss this with others. The family situation is normal and usual for her: ‘it’s normal now, isn’t it…but it’s everyday now, step-families’. If the girl is worried about an issue, she turns first to her resident mother for advice.

Father

The father is both a resident and non-resident parent, as two children now live with him and two with his ex-wife. He sees his step-daughter every day and is substantially involved in her care and in parenting decisions. He has a good relationship with his previous wife and they are mutually supportive of each other:
We still have a really good relationship. Although we’ve split up, it’s an amicable split. And I still go round and see her, she comes down here and sees me. We help each other out.

He visits his previous wife frequently and they communicate regularly about the children. The parents speak regularly on the telephone so they have a joint and agreed approach to parenting. Even though he does see his step-daughter every day, he feels that she has become more distant after the separation and especially towards her step-grandparents. The father has not had any contact with support services and was unaware of potential services that could help separated families.

Mother

As her older children were from a previous relationship, it was agreed that they would remain with her. However, the children still describe their step-father as ‘Dad’ and view him as the father figure in the family. The mother feels her children are well-integrated into their step-father’s life and are close to his extended family. She sees her ex-husband daily and also the two younger girls living with him: he takes all the children to school and visits her every day. Living near to her non-resident children is extremely important to ensure she is involved in their everyday lives. The resident mother is disabled and finds it difficult to walk, and she is still reliant on her ex-husband for day-to-day support. The mother has mental health problems after suffering abuse as a child and found it difficult to cope when she had her first child at sixteen. Due to difficulties in coping as a young mother, her older children were temporarily taken into care for two years, when her oldest boy was five and her oldest daughter was a baby. She and her ex-husband had prolonged difficulties with the behaviour of her son, who has only recently been diagnosed as having severe ADHD and psychological problems. He was monitored by the social services department for a number of years before being admitted to a secure unit, and more recently to psychiatric hospital when he began misusing alcohol and drugs and went missing for prolonged periods of time:

He was getting quite sexual with other children…[he was] bringing three, four, five year-old girls back to the unit. They decided that he was a danger to the public and to himself.

The mother feels relieved that her son is finally getting the specialist support he needs, as she found his situation extremely distressing. Throughout all of these difficulties she has maintained an extremely positive and mutually supportive relationship with her ex-husband. Because of her disability her husband had become her carer, and they decided to separate so that she could regain her independence. All parenting decisions are made jointly, they are both equally involved in day-to-day childcare and consistently support each other through difficulties. The mother describes the children’s welfare as their first priority.

The mother has had contact with a range of support services but very limited contact with services that specifically help with family separation. She experienced problems with housing services after her separation and had to wait six months to be re-housed with her older children. The mother has had extensive contact with medical services with regard to her son but was dissatisfied that his behavioural and psychological problems went undiagnosed for a number of years. She sees a counsellor every week, though emphasises that this is to help her deal with issues of childhood abuse not the family
separation. Both parents felt unsupported by social services with regards to her son’s behaviour: she felt that social services blamed her parenting skills and took years to recognise that her son needed intensive psychological support:

I’ve got some anxieties with the way we’ve been treated by the social services department. We feel like we’ve been neglected: we were asking for a psychiatric assessment and he never got one… It took two years for them to get us all in one room and discuss my son’s care, his needs.

The mother felt that social services gave no specific support with regards to the family separation:

When me and my husband split up, nobody has come down to see if the girls are okay…nobody has come down to see if it’s affected the girls in any way.

For the mother, social services became a burden and a source of anxiety rather than a means of family support.
5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to explore what might be done to support the involvement of non-resident parents – and especially those with a low income – so that they are better able to meet the needs of their children. Despite the sample being flawed by difficulties with the recruitment of families, sufficient data were gathered to enable conclusions to be drawn about what helps and hinders separated families to support their children to achieve the best outcomes.

Our intention was not that this project should represent the final word on how services can help separated families, but rather that it should mark the beginning of a larger research programme which could, for example, map mainstream services to separated families in the country, carry out further work identifying the outcomes of service use that are most relevant to families themselves and suggesting ways of how to measure them, and eventually to provide a framework for conducting evaluations of promising services to establish if they are, indeed, able to achieve better outcomes for children.

The aims of this study were:

- To describe the needs of children aged between seven and 16 in different types of separated families, as seen by children, parents and service providers
- To describe the needs of non-resident parents and resident parents in separated families, as seen by parents themselves and by service providers
- To provide a picture of the current services available to non-resident parents to facilitate their involvement with children
- To explore how far these services meet their needs, from the perception of children, the non-resident parents, resident parents and service providers
- To make recommendations for ways in which policy and practice can better meet the needs of non-resident parents and their children.

5.1. The needs of children

The children in this sample typically had the closest relationship with their resident parent, who was a key stabilising factor in their lives and the first person they would turn to with a problem. However, for the majority, contact with their non-resident parent was also extremely important and there were many positive accounts of the time children spent on daily or weekend visits to him/her. While many were happy with their current arrangements, over a third of the children in the sample stated that they would like to see their non-resident parent more frequently. For older children this would involve more flexibility in the arrangements, so that they could see the parent and not have to forego time with friends or neglect their schoolwork. For younger children, where routine and reliability are important factors in their feelings of security, patterns of contact which were regular but more frequent were more appropriate. However, the most important consideration for children was for contact to be seen as an evolving process which could change as they grew older or as their, or their non-resident parent’s, circumstances changed.
Having a non-resident parent who lived nearby was seen as an ideal solution. This minimised the effort involved in making visits (which not infrequently involved the other parent) and allowed for more freedom of movement between the two households.

The presence of a new partner and other children in their non-resident parent’s life affected children differently. For some, and especially children who had grown up as the only child in the family, it could, after a period of re-adjustment, become a positive experience, giving them access to more companionship and more significant adults in their life. However, for others it could be a source of tension, with new siblings becoming rivals rather than friends and the new partner in competition for their parent’s attention. Much seemed to depend on the attitude of the resident parent: where she/he viewed the presence of a new partner and new family as a beneficial influence on the former partner, the contact stood a greater chance of success than if she/he viewed the new situation as threat or source of personal distress to her/him.

Overall, the attitude of the resident parent and the relationship between the parents appeared to be the defining factors in the child’s relationship with the non-resident parent. When the resident parent was relaxed about contact and communicated well with the former partner, the child was more likely to enjoy a positive relationship with the non-resident parent. However, dislike and tension between the parents made contact difficult and communicated itself easily to the child, who in these situations invariably allied him/herself to the parent with whom most time was spent (and whose opinions were most often heard).

For this reason, one of the things that children do *not* need is an acrimonious relationship between the parents. In these circumstances, one or both of the parents was likely to find fault with contact arrangements, leading to the child experiencing times of not seeing the non-resident parent and/or feeling caught between the competing demands of parents. The subsequent pattern of irregular contact could easily be interpreted by the child as the non-resident parent’s indifference to seeing him/her. Children of all ages wanted stability and security with both parents. The only exception to this was where children felt unsafe in the presence of their non-resident parent, because of his/her behaviour, which might involve violence.

### 5.2. The needs of parents

The most frequently occurring pattern of contact was for children to have weekend visits, every week or twice a month. This was often a pragmatic arrangement, coinciding with the child’s educational and social commitments, but it was also the option favoured by the legal system and often part of an order made by the family court when parents had been unable to reach agreement. The rigidity of this arrangement did not necessarily suit either parent.

Because the visits took place at the weekend, contact tended to focus on enjoyable activities rather than more routine parenting. Resident parents were resentful of this situation, feeling that all the nagging and drudgery associated with bringing up children fell to them while their former partner took all the pleasure and fun. Non-resident parents, on the other hand, were largely pained at being excluded from the daily tasks associated with a child’s upbringing and from making decisions about the child’s health and education, for example. This also led to a discrepancy in parenting approaches in which,
typically, the resident parent imposed standards and discipline and the non-resident parent did not.

However, resident parents did want their former partner to have a regular routine for contact, as unreliability was a key source of irritation to them, whether this concerned seeing the children or paying child support.

Reliability combined with flexibility and the greater sharing of parental responsibilities and pleasures could be achieved between parents when their relationship allowed for good levels of communication and a joint desire to put the children first. Where parents were able to achieve this, it was to the benefit of the whole family. It was, however, not always possible as a relatively large proportion of parents, both resident and non-resident, maintained a hostile position which led to behaviour which was not in the child’s best interests.

The solution to this, according to the parents, was for the other parent to change. They did not appear to be prone to a great deal of self-examination which would allow them to recognise and learn from past events. The resident mother who admitted that she had deliberately obstructed contact in the early days of the separation – itself not an uncommon scenario – was a rare individual in this sample. Much more common was for a parent to lay the blame at the door of the other parent.

In these situations, parents felt they needed a service which would allow them to reach civilised agreement while preventing hostilities between them. The adversarial court-based system, they thought, exacerbated their negative feeling towards each other, but they did not appear to be mindful of the fact that it was precisely those negative feelings which had led them to the court. Parents who adopted a style of cooperative parenting, whether or not this involved shelving any bitterness towards each other, had shared major decisions, agreed on parenting styles and had contact arrangements with which they were both satisfied.

However, there were external factors which could help parents to ensure that their child’s sense of well-being was enhanced. Housing was a major problem for many, but especially for non-resident parents. They struggled to obtain social housing with enough space to allow children to stay overnight or accommodation which was near to their children, to facilitate contact with them. They also struggled to persuade schools to let them have school reports and information about parents’ evenings, even when they had parental responsibility.

More support was said to be needed by both sets of parents. Mothers favoured informal support groups while fathers, if they accessed support at all, opted for the more remote telephone help-lines. On the whole, however, neither set of parents knew where to go for either practical or emotional help and advice. They both reported feeling isolated and this caused or contributed to poor mental health. Non-resident fathers were less likely than resident mothers to recover their mental health quickly and reportedly needed support which they did not receive.
5.3. Services

The main services with which parents came into contact, and for which there is information, were statutory housing, education and social services departments and the family court service, Cafcass, for the conflicted parents. A small number had also attended mediation. In the case of children, a few had experienced counselling, predominantly through the school-based service.

As stated above, the majority of non-resident fathers indicated that they did not know what sources of support, advice or information existed for people like themselves and did not know where to go for help. Conversely, the two non-resident mothers in the sample had accessed several sources of help and reportedly found no problem in locating them. Notwithstanding these gender differences, parents were generally in agreement that services for separating families were not well enough advertised.

Several non-resident fathers suggested that schools typically favour the resident parent in terms of taking instruction without recourse to the non-resident parent’s views. They felt that more could be done by the education system to promote the positive involvement of non-resident parents in their children’s lives. School staff, however, felt they were constrained by the fact that they were only permitted to involve parents who had parental responsibility for the child. Nevertheless, there was some variation by area in the extent to which schools made efforts to involve fathers and to work with separated families who might be experiencing problems. Despite an investment of resources, these efforts were not always well rewarded as it appeared that parents did not always want ‘special treatment’.

School staff were highlighted as probably being best placed to help children and young people in separating families (assuming that they do attend school) as they have the most frequent and regular contact with them. However, parents felt they were not aware of young people’s personal circumstances and therefore did not provide support or refer them to counselling services (where they existed). The view of school staff was that they were usually not informed of changes in family circumstances and they only acted when it became apparent through children’s behaviour that there were problems.

Children who did access school counselling services found them very helpful. The main advantages were the service’s accessibility, and the freedom of children to choose when they needed to discuss difficult issues. But only one girl appeared to have access to school counselling on a long-term basis, which raises questions about its availability for being anything other than a crisis intervention.

Housing departments were seen by parents as being largely unhelpful as they were often slow in providing accommodation and, in the case of non-resident parents, did not meet their requests for larger accommodation to allow children to stay overnight. The view of staff in these departments was that they did not have the accommodation to offer: there was a general shortage of housing stock and of two bedded flats or houses in particular. They were not unsympathetic to the needs of parents and were themselves frustrated by the housing shortage.

Social services were not readily accessed by parents in this sample, who considered that there was stigma attached to receiving their intervention. They viewed them as a more
punitive than supportive service. Staff in social services departments were inclined to see themselves as dealing with serious domestic crises, which might or might not involve separated families.

Staff in all of the above three services were routinely sympathetic to and understanding of the needs of the individuals in separated families and recognised the value to children of maintaining contact with both parents provided this posed no risk to them. However, none of them thought they were in a position to target services specifically at non-resident parents, predominantly because of a lack of resources. Some also queried whether, in fact, it was within their remit to do so. Many considered that focusing on non-resident parents was not especially helpful to the children, who might be better served by services which looked holistically at the family structure. However, there is an argument to be made that any holistic service might still pay special attention to non-resident fathers in view of the fact that they have hitherto been overlooked.

Cafcass staff also felt that singling out non-resident parents for special consideration would not necessarily be helpful to the family as whole. In addition, they operated a service which was child-focused and the welfare of the child, not the parents, was their prime consideration. Many parents, both resident and non-resident, expressed disappointment with the service provided by Cafcass which, they thought was under-resourced, leading to delays in their engagement with the service and further delays in the preparation of reports to the court. This was a source of particular irritation to non-resident parents who had been denied access to their children by the resident parent.

Mediation services in the voluntary sector were generally not well known about by parents. Several described a hypothetical service which would help them focus on the child, rather than themselves, unaware that such provision already existed. However, those who did use a mediation service were not impressed and failed to reach agreement. The blame routinely lay with the other parent who sabotaged the intervention by failing to attend or to continue attending, or not engaging with the process when they were there.

5.4. Recommendations

Service providers in departments such as education, housing and social services believed that the needs of non-resident parents and their children should be met by a coordinated approach involving statutory and voluntary services. But none thought it was their primary responsibility. A greater extent of multi-agency working would help to address the needs of non-resident fathers, but it seems that a strategic approach, rather than an ad hoc arrangement, is needed.

Services for parents that cover various stages in the separation should be available and accessible at times when they are most needed by parents. A police force in one area has begun collecting data on the calls they receive over the weekend which come from separated parents making allegations of child abuse or neglect against the other parent. These account for a high proportion of their weekend calls. It is believed that such calls are made because there are no other services available to parents over the weekend when they may be experiencing distress (real or imagined) over contact arrangements.
Professionals thought that more child contact centres where non-resident parents can meet with their children are needed. Where there are concerns about parenting ability and/or the safety of the child, and supervised contact is ordered by the court, this is often not possible because there is no local centre where it can take place, or there is a waiting list. Once contact has been delayed it can often be very difficult to start it again.

Where there has been a delay in establishing contact, non-resident parents might often need help with parenting. If no contact between the parent and child has taken place for some months, the non-resident parent might be caring for a child whose needs are very different since they last met. This is particularly so with very young children. Provision of support at this time could be a key factor in successful, ongoing contact being established.

Some non-resident parents in the sample mentioned experiencing mental health problems either immediately following the initial separation, or a number of years later when agreed contact with the child/ren was repeatedly subject to disruptions. Parents reported feeling anxious, disempowered, and in a continuous state of bereavement. Additional stress came from the costs of repeat visits to solicitors and the courts when contact was being denied. Continuing poor mental health can have a serious negative impact on the non-resident father’s relationship with his child/ren, and consequently more, and more appropriate, support is needed.

A number of non-resident parents indicated that children might have questions about why the separation occurred, and also have hopes for a reconciliation between the parents. If the child/ren have no-one to talk to about their worries and perceptions, then their confusion and non-acceptance of the separation can continue for some time. But there was very low awareness among the children about services which could potentially help them deal with family separation. Services which do exist need to be better advertised and counselling in schools should be more widely available.

Respondents generally felt that services for separating parents were not well advertised and many did not know how to access help. This is something of a dilemma as it is likely that service advertising is quite widespread but that parents do not notice it when they do not need it. Nevertheless, it would seem that a more concentrated advertising campaign, possibly targeted at divorcing parents, is needed to alert parents to the fact that support services are, in fact, available.

The Government’s aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being (Every Child Matters). For some children in separated families this aim is not being met and more could be done to ensure that it is.
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