



Report Summary

Evaluation of the Child Maintenance Options Service

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Background

In 2008 the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) was commissioned by the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (the Commission) to evaluate the Child Maintenance Options Service (CM Options) telephone helpline.

The main aim of the evaluation was to establish whether the CM Options service telephone helpline helps to increase parents' likelihood of subsequently making child maintenance arrangements. The study also collected information on the profile of users of the helpline, their use and views of the service and the maintenance arrangements they made.

Methodology

The main data collection for the evaluation was a telephone survey of a random sample of helpline users. The sample was drawn in six tranches between February and September 2009. Each person selected was asked to take part in two interviews: a 'Baseline' interview between May and December 2009 and an 'Outcomes' interview around six to nine months later. In total 2,767 parents were interviewed at both stages.

The final sample is made up of two groups of parents:

- 77 per cent who were referred to CM Options from Jobcentre Plus.
- 23 per cent who came into contact with the service through other routes – the 'General' group¹.

Parents who used the CM Options website or face to face service, but not the telephone helpline, were not included in the sample.

Overview of key findings

Parents using the CM Options service

Most users were lone mothers from low income households.

Latent class analysis was used to identify groups of parents who had similar separation characteristics. Five groups were identified:

- **Long-term, bitter group:** were more likely to have had a bitter separation, to have been separated for a long time and to have little or no current contact between parents and between the non-resident parent and child (41 per cent).
- **Medium-term, contact group:** had been separated for a moderate amount of time. There was likely to be some, less frequent, contact between the parents and between the non-resident parent and child (21 per cent).
- **Recent, friendly, contact group:** were recently separated and were more likely to have a friendly current relationship and regular contact between parents and between the non-resident parent and the child (16 per cent).
- **Recent, mixed, contact group:** were recently separated but had a range of experiences in terms of how bitter the separation was. There was regular contact between parents and between the non-resident parent and the child (18 per cent).

¹There have been changes at the CM Options service since the sample was drawn including a decrease in the proportions of Jobcentre Plus referrals as a proportion of those using the telephone helpline.

- **Never in a relationship group:** were not in a relationship with the other parent of the child when the child was conceived. Very little contact between parents or between the non-resident parent and child was maintained (four per cent).

How Parents use the CM Options service

- Most calls to the service lasted between five and ten minutes (46 per cent) or 15 to 30 minutes (39 per cent) in length.
- 66 per cent of parents reported having had just one telephone conversation with the CM Options Service helpline.
- 71 per cent had discussed the different types of child maintenance arrangements in their call.
- 57 per cent of parents recalled being signposted to other relevant organisations and 50 per cent had received leaflets following the call.
- Parents were positive about how helpful they found their contact with the CM Options service overall: 67 per cent reported that it was either very helpful or quite helpful.

Parents with maintenance arrangements

- 56 per cent of parents had child maintenance arrangements eight to nine months after contact with CM Options. It is important to note that some of these parents already had arrangements in place or may have made maintenance arrangements anyway. 24 per cent of parents made maintenance arrangements following, but not necessarily as a result of, contact with the CM Options service. The effect of the CM Options service on maintenance arrangements is described below.
- The General group were more likely to have an arrangement in place (72 per cent) than the Jobcentre Plus group (51 per cent).
- Parents who were more recently separated and where there was regular contact between the non-resident parent and the child and between parents, were more likely to have a maintenance arrangement in place: 76 per

cent of parents in the ‘recent, friendly, contact’ group had an arrangement compared to 44 per cent of the ‘long-term, bitter’ group.

- Private² arrangements were the most common type, with 56 per cent of parents with arrangements reporting this type, whereas 41 per cent of parents reported having an arrangement made through the Child Support Agency (CSA).
- The report looked at whether parents have an arrangement that “works”; the definition used for a working arrangement is where the amount of maintenance is always or usually paid on time³. Using this definition, 64 per cent of parents with an arrangement had working arrangements and 36 per cent did not.
- Parents with more contact and a better quality of relationship with their ex-partner were more likely to have a working arrangement: 81 per cent of those in the ‘recent, friendly, contact’ group had a working arrangement, compared to 50 per cent of those in the ‘long-term, bitter’ group.
- Working arrangements were made up of a higher proportion of private arrangements than CSA arrangements (65 per cent of working arrangements were private compared with 33 per cent CSA).
- 62 per cent of parents thought their arrangements were fair.

²Private arrangements was the term used in the research but these are also known as Family-based arrangements.

³Or for a non-financial arrangement, one that is always or usually adhered to.

Parents without maintenance arrangements

- 44 per cent of parents did not have a maintenance arrangement eight to nine months after contact with CM Options.
- The most commonly given reasons for not having an arrangement were that their ex-partner was unwilling (29 per cent) or unable (34 per cent) to pay for maintenance and they did not know where their ex-partner was living (29 per cent).
- Of those with no arrangement, 52 per cent were in the 'long-term, bitter' group.
- 43 per cent of those users without arrangements reported that they were 'not at all likely' to make an arrangement in the future. However, 32 per cent reported they were either 'very likely' or 'likely' to make an arrangement.
- The majority of parents who reported being unlikely to make an arrangement in the future attributed it to issues around contact with their ex-partner or their ex-partner being unwilling or unable to pay.

The effect of the CM Options service contact on maintenance arrangements for parents referred by Jobcentre Plus

The impact of the service could not be established using standard quasi-experimental methods, because no practical means was found of identifying a suitable non-user comparison group. Instead, the effect of the service was estimated by comparing the rate of maintenance arrangements for those Jobcentre Plus referrals making 'moderate to high' use of the service with the rate of arrangements for the Jobcentre Plus group making only minimal use of the service. The latter group was judged to give a reasonable proxy to the rate of arrangements that would have been made in the absence of the service. That is, the 'low use' group were used as a proxy for a standard non-user comparison group. In order to ensure any differences in terms of maintenance between the two groups were not caused by other underlying non-service differences (such as differences between the groups in the length of time since separation, or the acrimony of the split), the two groups were matched on a wide range of factors, known to

predict maintenance, using propensity score matching. After matching on all these factors, the only observed difference between the two groups was the level of interaction with the service. The difference in the rates of maintenance arrangements for the two groups gives an estimate of the CM Options 'effect' on Jobcentre Plus referrals making a moderate to high use of the service.

The analysis was taken a step further to test whether, within the 'moderate to high use' group, there was any evidence that a more in-depth personalised approach led to better outcomes for parents. This was tested by creating a typology of different ways of using the CM Options service, based on latent class analysis. Four groups were identified:

- **Group 1:** had a high level of in-depth, personalised contact.
- **Group 2:** had a moderate level of in-depth, personalised contact.
- **Group 3:** had a low to moderate level of personalised contact.
- **Group 4:** had brief, less personalised contact.

Having established these groups, and after matching, a comparison of outcomes for the different groups generated estimates of the degree to which additional personalisation improves those outcomes.

The effect of the CM Options service was measured for the primary outcome: whether the CM Options service has had any effect on parents' likelihood of making a maintenance arrangement, and for a range of secondary outcomes: the type of arrangement that was in place (private and CSA), and whether the arrangement was working or not.

This analysis of effect did not cover the General group and is only relevant to those parents referred to the service by Jobcentre Plus.

- Around seven per cent of parents referred from Jobcentre Plus who had a 'moderate to high' level of interaction with the service had a maintenance arrangement in place at the 'Outcomes' interview stage that they would otherwise not have had.

- This increase was only found amongst those parents who had the most in-depth and personalised contact with the CM Options service, parents in Groups 1 and 2. There was no apparent CM Options effect on parents in Groups 3 and 4, or on parents who were not in contact with their ex-partner.
- The effect of the service on the moderate to high level use group appears to be broadly similar on both of the main types of arrangement, with an increase in both arrangements through the CSA and private financial arrangements being observed.
- Some of these additional arrangements were working, some non-working, although there is some evidence that the CM Options service helps to ensure arrangements are working.

Conclusions

The aim of the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission is “To ensure that the maximum number of children who live apart from one or both parents benefit from an effective maintenance arrangement” . This study suggests that the CM Options service does help to achieve this aim for parents referred by Jobcentre Plus (the impact of the general group could not be measured). The effect of the service is not minor considering the low intensity of intervention, with most parents having just one or two short telephone calls. The CM Options service is most effective for those parents who have the most in-depth and personalised contact with the service.

Over two-fifths of parents who had some contact with the CM Options service did not have a maintenance arrangement eight to nine months later. This study suggests that at least some of these parents might not face too many barriers to making an arrangement: for example, those who are more recently separated and who have regular contact. Others, however, face more substantial barriers: those parents who have been separated for a long time and who have little or no contact with their ex-partner.

⁴Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008, Part 1, clause 2(1)

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (ISBN 978-1-84947-614-0).

Research Report 3. July 2011).

You can download the full report free from: www.childmaintenance.org/en/publications/index.html