Help and Support for Separated Families Innovation Fund Evaluation

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Background

The Help and Support for Separated Families programme forms part of a set of reforms to help parents avoid adversarial approaches upon separation and collaborate in the best interests of their children. This report presents the findings from a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the programme which funded 17 projects providing at least one or more:

- **talk-based services** involving mediation or a therapeutic intervention;

- **information-based services** providing legal advice, information and signposting; and

- projects to assist with **contact arrangements** for non-resident parents.

Key findings

Referrals and marketing

Projects found it difficult to estimate how many clients would take up their service. Given the uncertainties, projects need to build in contingency to adapt to higher or lower than expected take up, consider barriers to reaching target groups and allow for review of referrals in the early stages.

Projects which were already well known in this area and with existing links to referral organisations, were better able to reach their target groups for referrals.

When marketing directly to clients, projects found it most effective to produce targeted marketing, such as leaflets for other agencies to give out, rather than blanket marketing such as local newspapers or social media.

If launching a new service, considerable resources are required to market to intermediaries to sustain awareness and referrals long term.

Service provision

Flexibility in the type and timing of provision was seen as highly desirable when dealing with clients who were often emotionally or logistically challenged and who frequently had entrenched conflict over financial or contact issues. This flexibility could be delivered either within the service or through strong onward referral links.

Factors contributing to successful delivery of **talk-based projects** included:

- Referral from an established service, such as the courts or the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), which acted as an implicit endorsement of the service.

- Careful assessment of couples' preparedness to avoid wasting resources if one or both partners was unwilling or not ready to engage in mediation.

- Well trained, skilled and dedicated staff to engage parents sensitively and sustain that engagement between sessions.

- Integration of services, either in house or through strong connections with other organisations.

- Flexibility in terms of the length of the intervention, requirements for both parents to attend all sessions and the preferred channel of communication.

It was much harder to engage clients through the intervention if they had serious health or disability issues, entrenched conflict, or if one partner had to travel a long distance for appointments.

Friends and family could sometimes be a barrier to success if they were influencing one partner negatively, but the children's grandparents were found in one project to be a positive influence among young clients if they were brought into the sessions.

Among **information-based projects**: Those offering legal advice could increase client confidence, but there was a high level of drop off after receiving this advice – relatively few parents went on to use the counselling and group work on offer.

Services offering web-based advice could provide high quality information accessible at times to suit clients. Also a web-chat facility worked well for clients who preferred some 'distance' when talking about sensitive issues.

Among the two **contact-based services** although there were some difficulties in securing referrals the projects were effective when they employed highly skilled staff and were deeply integrated with specialist services for often highly conflicted clients.

Staff working across all of the projects benefited from networking with other professionals to provide support and share best practice. All of the projects required more staff time for administration than originally envisaged.

Participant experience

Parents engaging in talk-based projects were very enthusiastic, feeling they had:

- improved communication between partners;

- a positive psychological impact;

- improved relationships between partners and children; and

- brought a number of other practical impacts.

Both parents and staff felt that the interventions had reduced conflict and time spent in the courts. The only exception seemed to be when mediation began a long time after a conflicted separation where the courts were already heavily involved.

Clients of **information-based services** welcomed the legal advice for the breadth of information on offer, the way it helped inform choices and the signposting to other services.

Some parents using **contact-based services** benefited from the improved communication enabled by a setting providing support and activities for the children. However, not all clients of these services were aware of the services offered beyond contact and some were concerned that they did not know the backgrounds of others using the shared spaces of the service.

Clients of all services were appreciative of the **quality of support they received from staff**: their knowledge, professionalism and dedication. Challenges reported by parents tended to reflect the difficulties of engaging some ex-partners or the impact of delays if they were put on a waiting list.

Most participants, across all income groups, felt that they would not have been able to **pay for the service** in full. Those receiving legal advice said they would have probably sought the advice of a solicitor separately if the project's legal advice was chargeable. Staff agreed and were concerned that charges could act as a barrier to engagement and add delays to uptake.

Outcomes

Of the 13 projects that measured parental collaboration at the start and end of the intervention, nine showed statistically significant improvements. However, when measured seven months after the start of the intervention, collaboration levels had fallen back somewhat and projects could benefit from considering ways of sustaining their impact.

Parents with shared care arrangements were significantly less happy with their contact arrangement than either parents with care or non-resident parents, showing that it is not only the amount of contact that matters, but also the co-operation around that contact. The success of the National Family Mediation service in improving contact among even highly conflicted partners showed the value of their intensive intervention methods.

While parents engaging with projects tended to see an improvement in contact arrangements, the projects had less impact on child maintenance arrangements (although they were not always the focus of the intervention).

Both parents and staff agreed that the services reduced pressure on the courts. Between 20 and 30 per cent of all project participants said the project had played at least some role in a decision not to use the courts in the future.

Project replicability and scalability

Whilst there were lessons learned about estimating demand and getting skilled staff in place, project managers were positive about the possibility of replicating services elsewhere.

When asked what they would do differently or develop, project staff mentioned:

- Building networks across organisations to integrate referrals and service delivery.

- Tailoring the marketing to target groups.

- Minimising time between referral and first consultation to avoid dropout.

- Offering the service in different languages to broaden engagement.

- Considering engagement with the wider family.

- Offering help on wider issues such as employment, housing or health or improve signposting to relevant services.

- Reassuring clients who are wary of counselling or group work about the aims of the project and emphasising that they are not trying to reunite the couple.

- Tailoring website content to reflect the stage of separation.

With the exception of online services, projects expected costs to rise proportionally with demand rather than achieving any economies of scale.

Although some projects were familiar with other funding sources, the services offered here were highly dependent on department for Work and Pensions (DWP) funding and not considered self-sustaining. No project staff were aware of Social Impact Bonds and there would be challenges in using them to support this type of intervention.

Methodology

The evaluation employed quantitative surveys to assess **outcomes**. These outcome measures included collaboration between the separated parents (using the Parenting Alliance Measure[1]), contact and financial arrangements, and court usage.

It also considered qualitatively the **process** of service delivery and looked at issues including the referral process, marketing, facilitators and inhibitors of the service and replicability/ scalability.

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[1] Abidin, R. R. and Konald, T. R. (1999). *PAM Parenting Alliance Measure Professional Manual*, Lutz, FI, Psychological Assessment Resources Inc.

Fieldwork was conducted at three stages
between March 2015 and January 2016: at set
up with project staff and DWP officials; during
the delivery phase with project staff and parents;
and then a final stage, either shortly after the
intervention (for project staff) or approximately
seven months after engagement with the service
(for parents).