

**family
solutions
group.**

EARLY SUPPORT FOR SEPARATING FAMILIES

A Pilot within Family Hubs

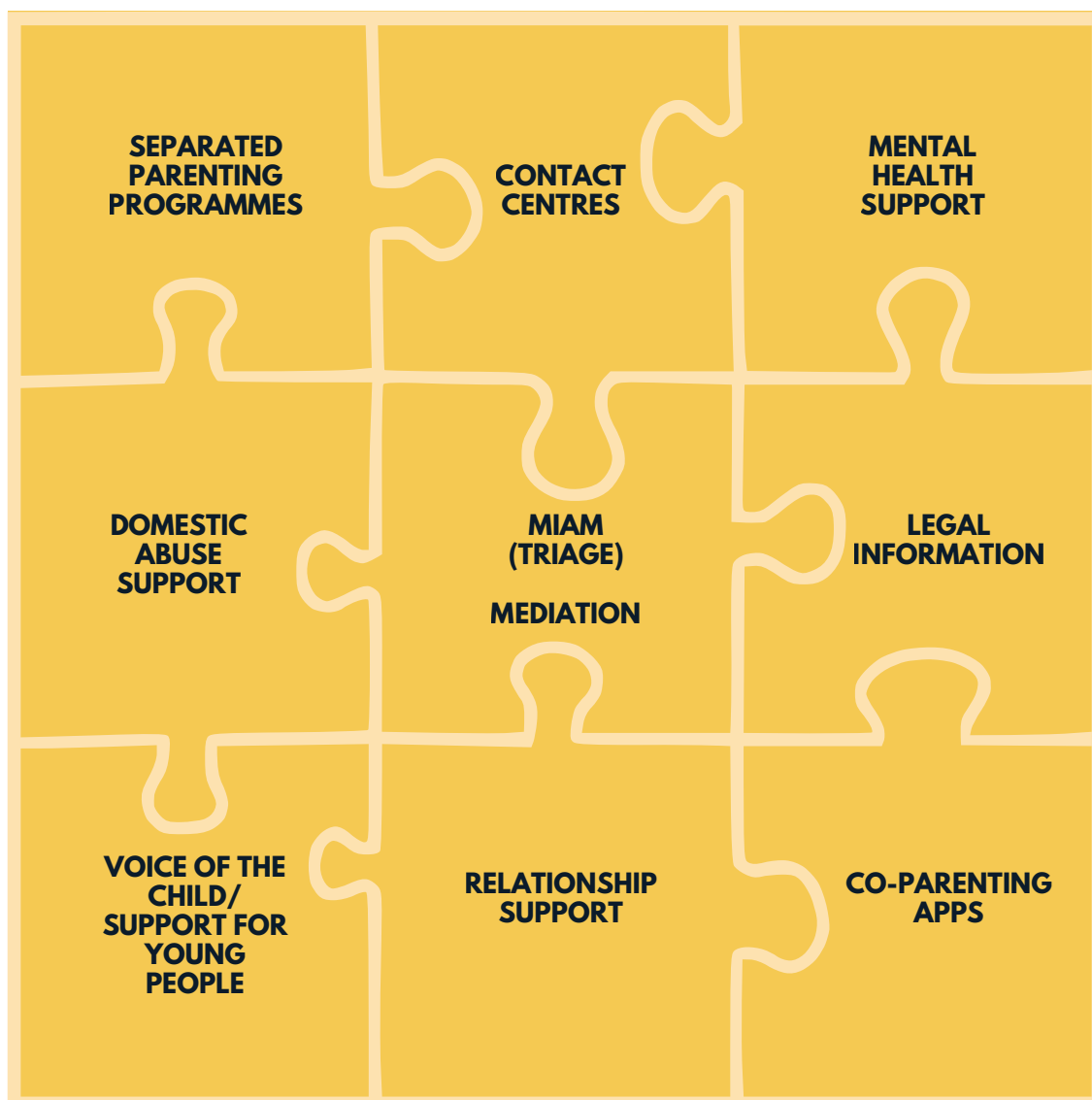


OVERVIEW

Spurgeons Family Hubs Pilot in Birmingham Family Solutions Drop-In, January – July 2025

Two Spurgeons Family Hubs in Birmingham hosted the Family Solutions Group to deliver an early support pilot for separating families. The 'Family Solutions Drop-In' was run on Mondays, for anyone struggling with issues following a family separation.

The needs of the parents who attended spanned a variety of issues, largely addressing communication difficulties about their child(ren), and being unsure where to turn for help.



EIGHT KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Focus on Relationships** – The challenges faced were not so much legal issues as relationship difficulties, primarily with communication. Building communication and co-parenting skills equips families to manage separation well for their children.
- 2 Embed Family Solutions in Hubs** – Position Hubs as the primary channel for early post-separation support and information.
- 3 Train Frontline Workers** – Use short recorded webinars to build staff awareness of support services for separated families.
- 4 Roll Out a National Blueprint for Family Solutions Support** – A scalable support model could easily be provided with the capacity to deliver separating family support nationwide.
- 5 Strengthen Community Links to Family Solutions Support** – Use hubs to connect schools, health, police, youth services and family services, ensuring coordinated support for separating families.
- 6 Promote Early Options** – Prioritise the early separation arena, focusing positively upon legal aid and vouchers for mediation and other local/online supports.
- 7 Break Down Silos** – Bridge gaps in separated family support between Family Hubs, family courts, and existing programmes like DWP's Reducing Parental Conflict.
- 8 Support Both Parents** - Encourage safe and positive relationships between child/ren and both their parents.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Members of the Family Solutions Group (FSG) were hosted at two Family Hubs in Birmingham run by Spurgeons. The pilot ran from January to July 2025 and offered a weekly 'Family Solutions Drop-In' service involving in-person, online and phone appointments with clients over the 6 months. Seven examples of client interactions are described in this report. FSG also attended weekly Family Hub triage meetings held to discuss and action cases. Over the course of the Pilot, several hundred cases were reviewed within the Family Hub triage meetings and on average, at least 10%, and sometimes 20% – 25% of cases centred around separation. This 10% - 25% were all identified as suitable for Family Solutions support, sometimes alongside other services identified for the cases. **Overall, the Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) were clear that Family Solutions input is badly needed.**

It is particularly notable that early intervention teams have not been trained in the support options available for separated families. Through working at the Family Hubs and delivering training to nine related teams across Birmingham, the FSG team experienced an almost complete lack of awareness and understanding of early resolution options, including Mediation Information and Assessment Meetings (MIAMs), legal aid for mediation, the mediation voucher scheme, separated parent programmes, child inclusive mediation, AdviceNow guides etc.

The pilot highlights the huge potential for identifying and addressing early intervention needs of separating families, something The Family Solutions Group has repeatedly called for. It shows that Family Hubs are an ideal setting for the radically improved delivery of post-separation support to families, and this could readily be formulated and implemented nationally.



We really want you to continue. We need this service, for sure. We hope funding is found so you can carry on as this family solutions help is really needed. Please come back!

DSL, Spurgeons Family Hub

THE FAMILY SOLUTIONS GROUP

The Family Solutions Group (FSG) is a voluntary group of multi-disciplinary professionals with expertise in family separation. It was set up by Mr Justice Cobb in 2020 to **shine a light on the needs of families following a separation**, outside of an application to the family court. As well as multiple papers and presentations, the FSG has published three key reports:

- What about me? Reframing support for families following separation
- Language Matters
- A Child's Right to Matter

Links can be found on the website www.familysolutionsgroup.co.uk

The FSG focus is to **restore child welfare** to the centre in systems which have evolved over years to meet adult needs, rather than those of children.



BACKGROUND

Approximately **40%-50% of children experience family separation**. Responsibility for separating families falls between multiple government departments. There is no coordinated oversight to address the needs of this large cohort of society.

The Family Court exists for families who have particular vulnerabilities and need a legal intervention. The availability of a Family Court order is important to protect those who are vulnerable. However, many families don't have those vulnerabilities and are turning up at court, seeking a referee to adjudicate when they are unable to agree arrangements themselves. The senior family judiciary and MoJ want to direct these families to resolve issues at a much earlier stage, before they turn to court.



Those of us working in the system, long for a better way of helping children, of helping parents to resolve what are, in effect, relationship difficulties when they break up. There are sadly many children, many parents, who need protection from harm and they rightly turn to the court and hopefully get the protection and priority in our system there. But very many don't have those sad needs. They just become stuck in sorting out the difficulties they have as adult parents in making arrangements for their children.

It's thought that about 40% of separating couples are turning to the family court. That can't be right, it can't be that lawyers and judges or people without lawyers in front of judges and magistrates need a system like that to sort out arrangements for their children.

Sir Andrew McFarlane, President of Family Division

WHY FAMILY HUBS?

Learning from the Australian ‘Family Relationship Centres’

Much can be learned from Australia’s family support model. Since 2006 Australian family law has required separating parents to try resolving their disputes through a service, funded by national and local Government, called family dispute resolution (FDR) **before** they can go to court.

Family Relationship Centres have existed in Australia for 75 years providing a range of services including:

- Family dispute resolution services
- Counselling and therapeutic support
- Family support and mediation
- Violence prevention and response
- Trauma and historical abusive services
- Community and multicultural services
- Specialised support programs
- Workplace and educational services

Relationships Australia is the largest provider of Family Relationship Centres. Their cost benefit analysis shows that the benefits of FDR far exceed its costs, to the extent of 20:1. (See **Annex A** for further details.) In summary, the benefits included:

- Fewer costs for the family law system
- Fewer costs of the family law system for families
- Improved outcomes for families related to
 - Child wellbeing
 - Family functioning
 - Mental health and wellbeing
 - Personal and family safety
- Positive impact on wider societal issues that affect communities

Many of the services offered by the Australian Family Relationship Centres overlap with Family Hubs in England and Wales. What’s missing in our family hubs is a post-separation Family Dispute Resolution service.

The FSG is keen to plug this gap in the UK by offering family dispute resolution services via family hubs. The pilot was deliberately set up to run out of family hubs, and our learning has been directly relevant to the operation of those family hubs.

DETAILS OF THE PILOT

Between January and July 2025, members of the FSG were hosted at two Family Hubs in Birmingham run by Spurgeons. The pilot offered a 'Family Solutions Drop-In' service, once a week on a Monday.

Family Solutions drop-in | Spurgeons

Over the 6 months which we attended, we were warmly welcomed into both hubs by the Spurgeons staff: at Lakeside family hub in the morning, and at Dyson family hub in the afternoon. Both provided a private space for us to meet clients and added our service to their impressively long list of family support services on offer.

When we were not directly seeing clients or delivering online training (more below) we were invited to join the staff with their regular Monday triage lists. This was a privilege, seeing the range of issues coming into the hubs, and joining the staff teams as each family's needs were carefully considered.

There are four areas on which we summarise our activities in the family hub pilot:

- Meeting clients in person, online or on the phone (either referred for an appointment or dropped-in)
- Joining in the Monday triage meetings
- Delivering training to Early Help teams and School DSLs
- Connecting with other local agencies – schools, health practices, Cafcass

Family Solutions is a much-needed service. We know through conversations with colleagues from Birmingham Children's Trust and Early Help that this is a service that is much needed.

Team Manager, Spurgeons family hub



Meeting Clients

In attending the Family Solutions Drop-In, clients had the opportunity to discuss their situation in confidence, and be given relevant information about their child's needs, the law, and the options for addressing issues. We gave out many fliers eg: The Family Justice Young People's Board's 'Top Tips for Separated Parents' and 'What the Law Expects from Parents who Live Apart'. We provided people with details of the Family Mediation Council (FMC) Find-a-mediator page, Gov.uk legal aid information, with Advice

Now Guides, Co-Parenting Apps, Relationship support, and with information about Separated Parent Programmes. A number of the clients had more complex issues, including three fathers with suicidal ideation.

We saw fewer clients than expected over the course of the pilot, for a number of reasons. Some are set out below under 'Monday triaging'. There were hardly any who 'dropped-in' as that didn't seem to be a feature in these family hubs; most had appointments lined up with us in advance.

During the client appointments we held, either directly in person, online or by phone we introduced parents to the following range of support services:

- MIAMs (directly to a mediator, or to FMC Find a Mediator page)
- Separated Parent Programmes
- Co-parenting Apps
- National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC)
- NACCC/Our Family Wizard (OFW) Parenting Plan
- Relate
- General mental health support (MIND/Restored Lives/GP)
- Specific male support (including 3 cases suicidal ideation)
- Domestic Abuse services (most are referred elsewhere other than FS drop in)
- Solicitor support for non-molestation order
- Online tailored legal support, 'Separate Space'
- Benefits agency
- Your Direction (for young people)

It's worth noting that all families referred into the family hubs had a child/ren in the 0-5 age range. There might be children of other ages within the family, but Family Hubs focus on providing services to families with children in the 0-5 age range. This meant our drop-in was similarly focused, hence only one family was offered a resource for teenagers, and we could not promote voice of the child consultations due to the age range of the children in the families we saw. Otherwise, this would very much have been a feature in the range of services being offered.

Also of note is the higher proportion of mothers that we saw. By the nature of the way that Family Hubs were historically set up, Family Hubs are used to engaging with mothers with children in the 0-5 age range and engaging with fathers is a newer area of service provision, although all of the Family Hub workers recognise the important role that fathers play. This again meant that our Family Solutions drop-in was similarly focused seeing predominantly mothers.

Here are some examples of the clients we saw:

Mother of two children

A mum of two young children was struggling to communicate with her ex-partner, who is autistic. She wanted to co-parent positively and recognised the importance of the children's relationship with their dad. However, every conversation was ending in arguments. When she called children's services for advice, she was told they couldn't help and to maybe try speaking to a solicitor. This mother was currently not in employment and was unable to afford advice from a solicitor. She was signposted to the Family Solutions Drop-In through the Family Hub. There, we discussed options like mediation (and legal aid and the MOJ Voucher), co-parenting communication tools, and separated parenting programmes, all of which she was really keen to explore. She had not heard of any of these prior to attending the drop-in.

Mother of six children

Mum attended the Family Solutions Drop-In with three of her six children. Dad has been regularly seeing the children at her place but she thinks this is no longer appropriate due to a breakdown in communication between the two of them. Dad has subsequently taken the children into his work and Mum does not think this is an appropriate either. Mum is at her wits end as to how to sort this out as the children love spending time with Dad, but he doesn't seem to understand about parenting. Dad has been threatening to take Mum to court so that he can have the children full-time.

Mum feels that the children love Dad enormously but that he has never had the children for more than a couple of hours and needs to understand more about parenting them by himself. Unaware of mediation or legal aid, Mum had assumed court was the only option.

The parents were referred by the Family Solutions Drop-In to mediation and to a separated parenting programme, New Ways for Families, plus they were introduced to a co-parenting app to help with their communication.

Following two mediation sessions, the parents agreed on a child arrangement plan and now communicate using the co-parenting app. Both found the process positive and constructive. The mother shared that she had felt overwhelmed at the outset, and that mediation gave her a clear, supported path forward.

Family with 2 children, separate meetings with mum (first) then dad

Mum had been referred to the Drop-In by her family support worker. Her 10 year old had become increasingly reluctant to see Dad, because of issues around drinking. She wanted to know how to set up contact arrangements via a contact centre for her 0-5 year old child and the 10 year old. As well as providing these details, we discussed the pattern over the couple of years since their separation, and the unpredictability of whether Dad would turn up or cancel at the last-minute causing disappointment to the children. The 10 year old had started to worry about their dad and his wellbeing, feeling responsible for him, and drink was increasingly a factor. Mum had tried to raise concerns with Dad but he got cross and wouldn't listen. She is unsure how to support her children and ensure the arrangements are appropriate and go well. She welcomed the opportunity to have a managed discussion with him with the help of a mediator; she hadn't known about the availability of legal aid, or the individual private initial assessment meetings (MIAMs) and the option for child-inclusive mediation for the children.

Dad arrived 2 hours early for his appointment. His work van had just been repossessed. Dad was in combative mode and felt like he was up for a fight through court if 'that's what Mum wanted.' He loves his kids, and they are the only thing good in his life. Mum seems to want to take that away along with everything else in his life; she has recently even stopped Facetime with his 10 year old. He seems to have no say in what Mum wants.

Further discussion elicited things going downhill since the divorce. He feels he's made a mess of everything, Voluntary IVA, open about drinking more, feeling like the kids need a better dad than him, which has led him to suicidal thoughts, as Mum seems to want to write him out of the children's lives. He drinks to be in a black hole to avoid killing himself. He knows he can't see the children at those times and so just doesn't turn up. He knows it's disappointing for them, but in those moments, it's best he stays away.

We talked about the importance of him as the children's dad and how much he loved them, and how much they need him. Discussed mediation as a way for Dad and Mum to have a balanced discussion to agree arrangements for the children. He agreed to take the actions discussed and to be honest about how he is really feeling rather than the bravado he arrived with. Referred to GP, MIND, Andy Man's Club, New Ways for Families, Mediation

Mother of two children

Mum arrived wanting to understand about the court process for divorce. A friend who has recently been divorced recommended her to come to the drop-in for some help. Mum is clear she has made a decision to divorce and had made an online application. Dad does

not want to divorce. They have been trying to work on their marriage for a couple of years now but recently Dad has become irritable in the household which is affecting the two children. We talked through the divorce process, financial arrangements and children's arrangements. Given information about other ways than court to resolve the financial and children arrangements. Mum had understood there was only the possibility of going to court resolve these issues. Mum was very interested in the idea of mediation as she was keen that they had an amicable way of resolving things. Both Mum and Dad are professional people and Mum feels they need to conserve their energies for their demanding jobs.

Discussed Dad coming along to the drop-in to get some information himself. Referred to Separated Parenting Programme (New Ways for Families), gave Mum FJYPB Top Tips and information about Spurgeons free parenting groups and courses. Gave information about the MOJ Voucher Scheme and referred to Mediation.

Family with a 5 year old son. Separate meetings with mum (first) then dad

Mum had heard about the FS Drop-In through her son's school, from another parent. She had a 5 year old son, and had recently returned to live with her parents, having left her husband. They'd had difficulties building up over the last few years, starting in covid when their son was a baby. Bickering turned to rows, and she decided it was best to leave. Her husband wants her to come back, saying she can't just take their child without any discussion or agreement with him. Communications with him have become very difficult. She's unsure what to do, about the relationship, about their child, about anything. She didn't know who to talk to or where to go for help. We had a lengthy meeting. Talked through options for relationship support, Relate, plus Restored Lives; Our Family Wizard, a co-parenting app (free to those on benefits) to manage communications; gave 'What the law expects when parents live apart' plus FJYPB Top Tips, plus information about safe processes to address issues with dad if they stay separated via MIAM and mediation, free if LA and/or mediation voucher.

Dad described feeling lost and without purpose – his wife has gone, his child has gone, his business is going badly, he has money worries, he feels ashamed, his life is nothing. He comes from a good family in Asia, of high standing, and now he is reduced to this, he feels a failure. When he returned from seeing his wife and son on Sunday afternoon, he sat and cried for 3 hours on a bench at the train station. Has discussed suicide ideation with GP and had been prescribed medication, but he isn't taking them.

We had a long discussion; emphasis on the important role he has as a father for his son. Linked him to Dads Unltd, Only Dads, Restored Lives in person in London, plus a mediator to discuss arrangements with his wife for contact and maintaining his

relationship with their son while they work out their next steps. Reframing current situation to him making choices with mum for their child's future. He was positive about having a role in the future, for his son.

Mother of 2 children

Mum had been referred to the drop-in by a family support worker. Following her separation from Dad 3 years previously, Dad has been seeing the children regularly. Communication is very poor between Mum and Dad and therefore Mum feels particularly cut off from how the children are when they are with Dad. This is exacerbated by the fact that the children both have special needs. Due to the lack of information from Dad, Mum cancelled all the children's arrangements 2 months ago. She had not heard about mediation as a way of trying to establish better communication with Dad about the children. Dad has made a court application making allegations about Mum preventing him from seeing the children.

Mum feels she's not in conflict with Dad but things have spiralled out of control as they have no way of communicating. We referred them to mediation, a co-parenting communication app and to a separated parenting programme which they could each attend separately. Mum felt very hopeful that mediation could be a way of them establishing parental communication about the children.

Mother of 3 year old

Mum arrived asking for help to keep Dad involved with seeing their young child. Mum and Dad had separated three months earlier and since then Dad has been using the arrangements to see the child as a way of him continuing his controlling behaviour of Mum. Mum is obtaining a non-molestation order and had been advised by the solicitor not to let Dad see their child. Mum would very much like Dad to be involved with their child as he's a good Dad and they (Dad and the child) have a good relationship.

We discussed safe ways for Dad to see the child including contact centres and Mum's parents supervising contact. Discussed mediation in separate spaces as a way of making these arrangements. Mum was very keen to take this option up as she feels this is a formal way that she can organise the children's arrangements which she very definitely wants to happen. Referral made to New Ways for Families and co-parenting communication tools. Also referred to a local experienced mediator for a MIAM, which will include a full assessment of the suitability of mediation in separate spaces and the best format for balanced discussions to take place.

Joining the Monday triage meetings

In Birmingham, a weekly Team Around the Family Network (TAFN) brings together a multi-disciplinary team who meet every Tuesday to discuss, decide and action cases. The family hubs both run a pre-TAFN triage meeting beforehand so that referrals can be allocated at the TAFN meeting in a time-effective way. The Lakeside and Dyson family hubs hold these pre-TAFN triage meetings on a Monday, prior to the main TAFN meeting on a Tuesday. We were kindly invited to join in the Monday pre-TAFN triage meetings with the family hub teams, if we were not otherwise busy seeing clients.

The numbers of cases referred into the pre-TAFN triage for each hub on a Monday could be anything between 5 – 15, and very occasionally over 20. Over the course of the Family Solutions pilot, and between the two separate hubs, there were several hundred cases which passed through their triage.

Many cases were not suitable for Family Solutions drop-in support, perhaps relating to housing or immigration needs or domestic abuse, but some were directly relevant to parental separation. On average, we found that at least 10%, and sometimes 20% – 25% of Monday triage cases centred around separation, where there were no significant safeguarding allegations.

A referral form for Ms A and Mr B, with 2 year old son, simply said:

Low level parental conflict over child contact. They've been referred to court by early help.

As stated above, the main TAFN meetings run by Birmingham Children's Trust are on a Tuesday and we were not part of that team network. Over the 6 months during which the pilot was run, there were many cases recommended by the Monday pre-TAFN hub triage teams for Family Solutions support, but before they could be actioned they had to pass through the Tuesday TAFN meeting. Notably, over the course of the 6 months, not one case came back from the main TAFN to the FS drop-in.

We reflected on the learning from this, with various DSLs in the family hubs teams. Various thoughts were shared:

- First and foremost, the multi-disciplinary TAFN members didn't know about any family solutions support on offer; it's not part of their training (more below). They had not met the FSG team running the Family Solutions Drop-In pilot, the Drop In service was outside anything known to them. There may have been an understandable reluctance to refer parents to the Drop In.

- It is also possible that TAFN did pass on referrals to parents, and that the parents chose not to engage. Family solutions support is voluntary, not mandatory.
- Linked to that, is that parents struggle to trust new professionals. Rather than endless signposting, it's best to work with one trusted professional, who can support them directly into family solutions services without going via other professionals.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the DSLs were clear that this family solutions service is a service which is badly needed.



Comments from Designated Safeguarding Leads

I had a family in this morning's triage and it's all about broken relationships and hurt. We need the Family Solutions support to be promoted in a more accessible way.

There's a need for families to access this type of Family Solutions support. 100%. But in a way they'll accept and at the right time.

My thoughts are that a tracker to monitor referrals and attendance to support would be great and where families did not attend to explore some of the reasons behind this.

As DSLs, we ought to know how to wrap around a separated family and be familiar with the family solutions options available to help them. It doesn't form any part of our training and it should. For definite we need to know this.

Delivering Training

It quickly became apparent that those working with families in early intervention teams have had no training in support options for families following a separation. The staff who we've met at family hubs, at Birmingham Children's Trust, School DSLs, and Birmingham Voluntary Sector Council deal with issues arising out of separation all the time. They did not know that there's a free MIAM available for a parent on benefits to talk through options, nor legal aid mediation, co-parenting apps, separated parent programmes, the mediation voucher scheme, or AdviceNow guides. They know of the family court, but none of the earlier resolution options.

We've delivered 11 training sessions to various teams across Birmingham:

- Barnardos
- BVSC network
- School DSLs
- Birmingham Children's Trust team managers
- BCT early help teams
- North Birmingham Networking Group
- Sellyoaks Early Help
- Individual training sessions
- Plus Spurgeons Parenting Group Streams 1&2 lined up for autumn.

A regular feature of each training session is that nobody has heard of a MIAM, and nobody knows about legal aid for mediation or the mediation voucher scheme.

I think training is needed for Senior staff who line manage practitioners, to cascade this to practitioners . This would allow practitioners to better understand the mediation services and how this can be incorporated into Early Help Plans.

Team leader, Spurgeons family hub



Community early help worker

A community early help worker visited the drop-in in April. Her role is to find out what services are being offered in the community and to share the information to the early help teams. She visits family hubs to check she's aware of all the services on offer. She'd heard about the FSG drop-in from the Dyson centre manager, so 'dropped-in'.

She had no idea about the following family separation services

- MIAMs – what they are, and free for those on benefits
- Legal Aid for mediation
- Mediation voucher scheme
- Child Inclusive mediation
- Co-parenting apps
- The range of separated parent programmes. She knew of the organisation TripleP but hadn't heard of their Transitions programme for separated parents.
- Information about what's expected when parents separate. Ref to 'custody issues'
- Relationship breakdown workshops
- Your Direction workshops for young people

“ This is so much information I didn't know. I've been in the post for 2 years and have never heard of any of this. I would have no idea even where to find any of this. There's a real difficulty in the dissemination of clear information. I attended 'Right-Help-Right-Time' when I joined the early help team but it doesn't have a module on family separation.

I can't understand why we don't know about this. Separation comes up all the time. We don't know enough to do our job properly.

Community early help worker

Connecting with other local agencies

Through the hubs' introduction, we were able to meet and deliver training to a number of Birmingham school DSLs, and a local GP practice also got in touch. They said health issues around family separation come up all the time and the surgery never know where to refer their patients to. We notified CAFCASS and those running the Birmingham Pathfinder of our Family Solutions drop-in; they wished us well but had no further involvement.

This fourth part of our pilot was limited, partly due to the short length of the pilot, partly down to our reliance on local introductions to build awareness of the pilot, and partly down to limited resources. It takes time to promote the Family Solutions drop-in via these other local touchpoints and we didn't have capacity to do much of that.

If Family Solutions services were a regular feature of family hub services, then there is a huge scope to build awareness through local agencies.



LEARNINGS FROM THE PILOT

- **Family hubs are ideal for dissemination of information and support services.** There is a place for early solutions-focused support for families, before things unravel and a parent turns to the court for help. Currently, these opportunities are being missed.
- **It would be easy to develop a blueprint for post-separation Family Solutions support in family hubs, which could be rolled out nationally.** We were only there for 22 Mondays, and so only touched the surface of getting information out and about to other local agencies, but as family solutions options become better known, the referrals would inevitably increase. This could be replicated across all family hubs.
- **Hubs are ideal for reaching into community services, schools, health practices, police, youth services, as well as to families themselves.** There will be open doors via schools/health to reach more families at an early stage if family solutions became an established part of the family hubs.
- **Training is needed.** Currently, early help and family support workers have no information about the post-separation options for families. References to ‘custody’ were not uncommon, and the view seemed to be that if parents have difficulties they are directed to court. Training is needed:
 - To explain the legal expectations on separated parents, to manage co-parenting wherever safe to do so, and why this is good for children.
 - To explain the range of post-separation resources available for parents, and age-appropriate children. To include voucher scheme/legal aid mediation, and links/how to find local/online support services. There are plenty of options available other than an application to court.
 - To understand these relationship issues outside of a legal lens. The challenges faced by the families we saw were not so much legal issues as difficulties with communication. The full range of non-legal support services needs to be known; this is as much about relationships as about law.
 - This training need not be expensive, it could be a couple of 1 hour recorded webinars.

- **There seemed a disconnect between early help offered through Family Hubs and the family court.** They are separate silos, with no apparent overlap on how to maximise a positive impact on a child through the separation transition and minimise a negative impact. In the same way that nobody working in private family law has heard of the DWP 'Reducing Parental Conflict' programme, nobody working in the family hub or early help setting has heard of a MIAM, the Mediation Voucher Scheme, legal aid for mediation, or other family solutions options. As has been said many times, these operate in silos.
- Perhaps linked to that is a general presumption of maternal gatekeeping. **Much of the help is focussed on supporting mum; there's much less focus (that we saw) on fostering a child's relationship with dad and recognising him as important for that child's life.** A clear understanding of the law (as it currently stands) is not well understood or applied.

We've learned that the starting point if there's no safeguarding is for the child to see both parents. We need to be bolder in not aligning to a primary carer who's often mum. We need to be asking ourselves what's needed for children to see both.

DSL reflection on learning from Family Solutions Pilot.

- **Nothing was known about the opportunity for the voice of the child to be heard** using a CIM mediator, away from court and in a confidential setting to support the family decisions.
- **Family Mediators are needed in the family hub/local authority setting.** We have written a separate paper for the FMC to argue for the restoration of 'Child-only' accreditation, to increase the numbers, diversity and relevant skillsets for community-based family mediation. The current FMC requirement for all mediators to achieve competency in finance and property matters precludes many from training to be a mediator. In practice, an early help worker who becomes a family mediator would bring a much more relevant skillset to this type of family mediation, than those with legal skills in finance and property. Restoring 'child-only' accreditation will also address issues around the limited number and lack of diversity of family mediators. It's a win:win in every way.

CONCLUSION

The pilot has shone a light on the early intervention needs of families following a separation.

Those families suitable for our drop-in service were not immediately looking for a legal remedy; they had issues which needed a family response, to start a conversation early and point them to help, rather than leave things to unravel until a potential court application is made at some later date.

The Ministry of Justice is responsible for running the family court but, as evidenced by the knowledge-gap of those working with families in Birmingham, this does not extend 'upstream' to the relationship needs of families following separation; to the likes of the families referred to above.

The Family Solutions Group has repeatedly called for a much earlier engagement with separating families than when they turn to the door of court for help. Family Hubs are an ideal setting for the delivery of post-separation support to families. It would be easy to develop a blueprint for this, which could be rolled out nationally.

The cost benefit analysis already undertaken by the Family Relationship Centres in Australia provide valuable data to support the provision of family dispute resolution services in a family hub setting.

Finally, we'd like to extend our warmest thanks to the teams at Lakeside and Dyson family hubs. They welcomed us into their workplace with trust and openness. It was a privilege to see the care and commitment given by them to each family referred into their hub.

“We really want you to continue. We need this service, for sure. We hope funding is found so you can carry on as this family solutions help is really needed. Please come back!

DSL, Spurgeons Family Hub.

Thank you.

Carlie Norris, Beverley Sayers, Helen Adam, Selina Watts

August 2025

ANNEX A

Cost benefit analysis provided by Relationships Australia, July 2025

At a meeting in July 2025, Relationships Australia presented information about the cost benefits of the family dispute resolution services provided within the Family Relationship Centres.

Traditional cost benefit analysis of the Australian Family Dispute Resolution Service (FDR) in the Family Relationship Centres, focussing solely on Government savings, reports benefits roughly 1.5 to 2.25 times larger than the costs.

Inform Economics further analysed the FDR using Cost-Benefit Analysis to evaluate the economic and social impacts of the FDR services. The analysis used an evidence-based approach to compare the Australian family law situation before 2006 and currently. The analysis showed the benefits of FDR far exceed its costs, to the extent of 20:1.

The benefits included:

- Fewer costs for the family law system
- Fewer costs of the family law system for families
- Improved outcomes for families related to
 - family functioning
 - Mental health and wellbeing
 - Personal and family safety
 - Child wellbeing
- Positive impacts on wider societal issues that affect communities

When looking at the cost benefit ratio for the family law system alone (i.e. including courts costs to families but excluding other benefits), Inform Economics established the benefits of FDR far exceeds its costs to the extent of 15:1 which was based on

- Benefits
 - Avoided costs to the court system
 - Avoided court costs to families
- Costs
 - Costs of FDR Services to Government
 - Costs of FDR Services to Families

Even considering the cost benefit ratio to the Government alone for the family law system (i.e. excluding the cost benefit to families), Inform Economics established that FDR resulted in avoided costs 1.5 times greater than the incurred costs.

The analyses are summarised in the following table

<u>Scope of Analysis</u>	<u>Description of Analysis</u>	<u>FDR Benefit:Cost Ratio</u>
Government	Costs of courts and FDR Implementation	1.5 : 1
Government and Family	Costs of courts and FDR Implementation	15 : 1
Government and Family	Costs of courts and FDR Implementation, including estimated cost benefits of improved family outcomes	20 : 1

References

New analysis highlights the value of family dispute resolution services

<https://www.relationshipsvictoria.org.au/news/fdr-cba-summary-241121/>

Family Dispute Resolution Services Cost-Benefit Analysis Summary

<https://rav-prod-cdn-dxgebadtg7bahthb.a03.azurefd.net/media/j5knazgn/rav-fdr-cost-benefit-analysis-summary-25068.pdf>

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