

TRANSFORMING BIRTH REGISTRATION

Briefing Note: Transforming Birth Registration

- Half of all family breakdown occurs in the first two years of a child's life.² This is despite the fact that a large proportion of babies in the UK are born to couples, with 95 per cent of births in England and Wales registered by both parents, and 85 per cent of parents living at the same address at the time of birth.³ There is an additional 'injustice' around parental separation with family breakdown falling disproportionately on poorer children.⁴
- Birth Registration is a highly significant 'touchpoint' with the state both in terms of near universality⁵ (through law) and its potential for early identification of families requiring support.
- *This policy proposal makes a number of recommendations to transform birth registration, moving from an administrative process to a more structured support session offered to all families:*

1. Creating a universal and inclusive offer:

We would recommend extending the new birth registration through invitation to all new parents regardless of family type or the process by which they became a new parent to ensure that a new birth registration 'conversation' is a universal (and inclusive) offer.

To ensure that a new birth registration process addresses the needs of all family types we need to ensure it is a 'universal' offering. While birth registration is currently near universal. There is added complexity for those who become parents through adoption, surrogacy or fertility treatment.

Recognising the vital role fathers play in the lives of children, we propose that fathers are afforded the same recognition as mothers in the birth registration process (this would be subject to the agreement of mothers to ensure this was appropriate). Ensuring fathers are almost present could be as simple as writing directly to fathers (with the mother's permission) at the point of birth to invite them to attend.

2. Moving birth registration from civic premises to Children's Centres:

A number of organisations (including the CSJ) have made recommendations to Government that birth registration is moved to Children's Centres (or an appropriate local charity where family/parenting support is offered) to ensure all parents in a local community 'come through the doors'.

There are no legal or regulatory changes necessary to enable birth registrations to take place outside civic offices (it is simply a case of the Registrar moving location). This already happens in some Children's Centres.

This represents a simple change which could help to move birth registration away from a legal process to a more supportive session focused on helping parents.



² Understanding Society Data, 2010-11

³ Taken from Fatherhood Institute paper on fathers and maternity services, 'Who's the bloke in the room? Fathers during pregnancy and at the birth in the UK', p5

⁴ DWP (2017) Households below average income, 1994/95-2015/16. Table 4.14ts

⁵ In England and Wales, 96.5 per cent of parents comply with the 42-day registration rule; the 3.5 per cent – or more than 25,000 people – who do not could face a £200 fine. The Independent, 2013.

3. Developing a structured conversation:

This policy proposal recommends developing a structured conversation with the presenting parents to understand their needs and link to support services.

This conversation would be delivered by up-skilling Registrars to extend the conversation they have with presenting parents in a structured way to identify need. The Government might want to consult the Relationships Alliance⁶ on how its members could deliver transformed birth registration conversations to support new parents.

By moving to universality we ensure that support is offered to all family types (including same sex couples adopting a child). This session would be designed to specifically raise awareness of relationship stress associated with starting a family and encourage uptake of relationship support.

There is emerging evidence that same-sex couples are separating at much higher levels than their opposite sex peers⁷ (although the numbers are small). A new universal birth registration process can support these couples and ensure equality of provision.

In addition to a new structured conversation the Government could consult expert organisations (particularly the organisations making up the Relationships Alliance) on developing a 'Relationship MOT' which could be offered to new parents (potentially for free in low income areas or as a paid-for offering for couples with higher incomes) following the registration conversation.

This could help to normalise and increase uptake of relationship support at the point at which couple (and family) relationships are likely to come under most strain.

4. Using 'apps' to link parents and target advice:

The Government should scale the provision of 'apps' (and other digital communications) aimed at new parents through a transformed birth registration process so that new parents have access to online provision of guidance and a network of other parents, both online and in their local area.

The CSJ would recommend an Innovation Fund to support the development of new parenting 'apps' at scale using grant funding and promotion through the birth registration process.

Newly developed at-scale 'apps' would have three functions:

1. *Using geo-location technology:* Through the use of geo-location technology users will be able to find local parents at a similar stage of the pregnancy process or parenthood and encouraged to make 'real world' connections and social groups.
2. *'Chat':* At scale chat functions allow parents to talk to other parents in real time (at any time of the day or night) to ask questions and share concerns. This function would provide a library of conversations and connect fathers together to discuss fatherhood and talk about the experience of early fatherhood.
3. *Targeted advice and guidance:* Using data collected through user profiles health professionals, local maternity services and (where available) Children's Centres would be able to target advice and guidance. Midwives based in the community could use this data to connect parents to other relevant help such as a youth service for young parents and local parental support networks.

⁶ The Relationships Alliance is a recognised grouping of: Relate, OnePlusOne, Tavistock Relationships, MarriageCare

⁷ Office for National Statistics: Divorces in England and Wales, 2017.

5. Using savings in the Married Couples Allowance to transform Birth Registration:

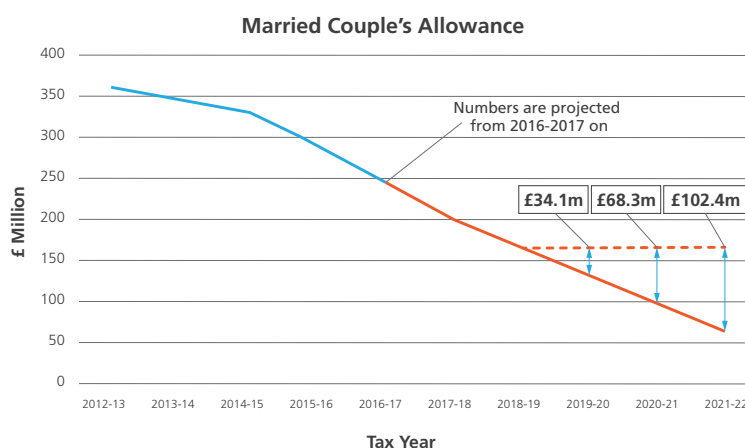
We have identified approximately £200m (over three years) which could be ring-fenced to support a transformed birth registration process. This money could be found through the declining uptake of the Married Couples Allowance.

The Married Couple's Allowance (MCA) is available for couples married or in a civil partnership that are living together, providing one of them was born before April 6, 1935.⁸ The MCA is a tax relief worth about 10 per cent of taxable pay for the higher earning partner (or if the marriage was before 2005 the husband's income is used). The benefit has upper and lower limits for both the amount of tax that can be claimed and how much that can be earned and is worth between £336 and £869.50 per year.⁹

Due to the age limited nature of MCA Government expenditure on this tax relief is declining rapidly and is likely to disappear altogether within the next decade. As the number of couples who match the profile described above decreases, the reliefs too will decrease until the cost is £0. Using the cost of the reliefs from the last five years,¹⁰ we have projected the cost for the next four years and calculated the amount saved as the costs decrease, using the 2018-2019 cost of £165million as a base line.

By maintaining expenditure on the MCA at 2018/19 levels (estimated at **£165m**) and re-allocating the difference between this level and the amount of MCA claimed over a three year cycle for a new fund to support low income couples with children access relationship support totalling approximately £200m.

The chart below projects a decreasing draw down on the budget for the Married Couples Allowance over a three year period. It is anticipated that this fund would provide **£34.1million** in year 1, **£64.2million** in year 2 and **£102.4million** in year 3.



This recommendation would be cost neutral to the Treasury and existing claimants would continue to receive MCA payments.

These funds could be used to design and deliver relationship and marriage support at an early stage signposted through the transformed birth registration process. Funding should be targeted to areas where family breakdown is highest and resulting in significant uptake of welfare consumption and increasing child poverty.

With additional research support from Emily Farley (researcher, CSJ)



⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/married-couples-allowance/eligibility>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/Government/statistics/main-tax-expenditures-and-structural-reliefs>

Indicative Costings: Transforming Birth Registration

Providing a 'relationship MOT' to all first-time parents

£35million - £42million

There are approximately 280,000 first time births in England and Wales. The leading providing of relationship support, Relate estimate that a 1-hour 'relationship MOT' could be provided for £125-£150 per session. This rate is at the higher end of a 1-hour Relate session and some funds could be reserved for additional support (particularly for low income couples). By delivering relationship support at an increased scale charities within the Relationships Alliance¹ such as Relate could be encouraged to provide additional services to couples who can afford to pay with excess redistributed to support low income couples receives heavily subsidized or free services.

Writing to all first-time parents to invite them to register the birth of their first child and a 'relationship MOT':

£1.7million

Improved public communication is an important part of transforming Birth Registration. Engaging diverse families and in particular fathers (with the permission of mothers) ensure this touch point fully engages all families and the parents within them. This note proposes a high quality direct mail project with bespoke mailings targeted at both mother and father and reflecting different family types where tailored messages maybe appropriate. We have consulted a leading direct mail supplier and estimate a cost of approximately £3 per mailing going to 560,000 individuals (i.e 280,000 x 2).

Moving Registrars to Children's Centres:

£2.7million

There are 180 registration districts in England and Wales. The practical impact on these bodies will be to move registrars to Children's Centres where appropriate. In cost terms this will likely mean some IT costs related to flexibility and transport costs (ie mileage) for registrars. This is likely to be a minimal cost and it is proposed to provide £15,000 per registration district per year to reflect this.

Delivery of parenting 'apps' at scale:

£5million

The original note on Transforming Birth Registration proposed the development of parenting apps through an Innovation Fund to develop these apps at scale until they are commercially viable. More detail can be found in the CSJ report - Testing Times: Supporting fathers during the perinatal period and early parenthood², pp53-55. A fund of £5million is proposed to provide grants to parenting apps to scale their delivery.

TOTAL: £44.4million - £51.4million

¹ The Relationships Alliance is a formal body of established relationship support charities comprising: Relate, OnePlusOne, Marriage Care and Tavistock Relationships

² <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Testing-Times-FINAL.pdf>

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