

## Chapter 13

### Meeting with a Marriage Counsellor

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... by its very nature Marriage Guidance has to deal with imponderables. There is no yard-stick of success or failure, no valid frame of reference for an accurate assessment (or definition) of its effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>

It was recognised during the parliamentary debates on the Family Law Bill that the law is limited in terms of what it can require of people at the point of marriage breakdown. Anything resembling compulsory marriage counselling was ruled out as a contradiction in terms. Instead, the Act employs the idea of *encouraging* the use of counselling through the provision of information, a period for reflection and consideration, the offer of a meeting with a marriage counsellor (free for those eligible for non-contributory legal aid) and the extension of legal aid for those entitled to it to cover the cost of marriage counselling. These are all novel provisions.

The offer of a meeting with a marriage counsellor (MWMC) is enshrined in the legislation (Section 8(6)(b)) although more detailed work on the format of the meeting was left to the Lord Chancellor's Department, in discussion with the main marriage support agencies. Concerns were expressed in parliamentary debates about how such services would be monitored, the need for appropriately qualified counsellors, and the emphasis which should be placed on saving marriages.

#### Designing the MWMC

In February 1998, agreement was reached that Section 8(6)(b) of the Family Law Act should be piloted, and the marriage organisations funded through grant-in-aid by the Lord Chancellor's Department were invited to participate in the development of the provision. These agencies – Relate, Marriage Care, Tavistock Marital Studies Institute, Jewish Marriage Council and One-Plus-One – form the UK Marriage Organisations Group (UKMOG). Professor Douglas Hooper joined the group as a participant observer in order to facilitate the process of developing plans for the MWMC. The Lord Chancellor's Department, recognising that the necessary expertise for the MWMC lay with the marriage agencies, compiled guidelines for the programme. These were as follows:

1. The package for the MWMC was to have a practice and training component.
2. The meeting should have two sections, one of which would be a standard introduction to marriage counselling and the other idiosyncratic to the specific counselling agency offering the MWMC.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallis, J.H., *Marriage Guidance: A New Introduction*, Routledge & Kegan Paul (1968), p. ix.

3. The meeting should accommodate individuals and couples at any stage in the divorce/separation process.
4. The meeting should enable the enquirer or client to reach a decision about the next step for them.
5. The marriage agencies were invited to host the MWMC in pilot areas of the country, but were asked to designate one agency to act as the lead agency for planning purposes.
6. Account was to be taken of issues relating to domestic violence, and also of the eligibility of the client(s) for legal aid support.
7. The quality benchmark would be that an appointment for a MWMC would be offered within one working day of contact with the booking centre, and the MWMC would take place within seven days of contact being made (unless the attendee expressed a wish to delay the MWMC).

The proposed period of operation of the MWMC pilot was from mid-June to December 1998, and therefore the time available for the detailed planning and execution of the training and organisational arrangements was short. An executive group of three agencies (Relate, Marriage Care and Jewish Marriage Council) was formed and Relate was proposed as the lead agency. The chief executives of these three agencies were joined by representatives of London Marriage Guidance Council, the Asian Family Counselling Service and the African Caribbean Family Mediation Service. Detailed proposals for the selection, training and delivery of the MWMC in the eight prescribed pilot areas, and for the number of agencies and the number of counsellors to be trained, were developed by the appointed project officer. Operationally, the MWMC was to be routed through the Leicester and East Midlands information meetings pilot acting as a centralised call centre, and the pilot manager was invited to join the executive group and share in the planning. The pilot sites to be included in the study were London, Greater Manchester, South West, East Anglia, Leicester and East Midlands, Solent and the Isle of Wight, Merseyside and North Wales, and the North East.

The executive group set up by the agencies was instrumental in bringing about a change in the culture in which local marriage counselling agencies operate, as the MWMC required specific procedures to be followed which could not be incorporated into existing frameworks. Some careful negotiation had to take place as local agencies (particularly Relate Centres and, to a lesser extent, Marriage Care) have their own autonomy, although control of professional training and service standards rests with their national organisations. A detailed document was prepared by the Lord Chancellor's Department in order that local marital agency managers could be briefed about the roles, tasks, financial arrangements and management responsibilities relating to the offering of the meeting. The MWMC was introduced into the information meeting pilots in July 1998. Attendees (who could go alone or with their spouse) were encouraged to examine their options and decide whether counselling might be appropriate, and were given information about how to arrange counselling appointments. Although there was a focus on problem solving, the meeting itself did not go into counselling. The Department's guidelines required counsellors to be trained to deliver the meeting using a script, in order that one of three outcomes would be achieved:

1. The attendee would leave the meeting feeling that they had received enough information to work on their marriage.
2. The attendee would agree to go to marriage counselling with a view to saving the marriage.
3. An attendee who had been uncertain of whether to divorce would be enabled to make a firm decision.

The MWMC was characterised as solution-focused.<sup>2</sup> Solution-focused brief therapy is based on the belief that talking about the future is often more effective in providing rapid change than talking about the past. Solution-focused approaches:

- are client-led
- look to the future
- do not ignore the past
- focus on health rather than on pathology
- seek to identify, address and plan desired changes

### **Training Counsellors To Deliver the MWMC**

The counsellors selected for the pilots attended a two-day training course at Herbert Gray College, Relate's national headquarters in Rugby. All the training, including that for supervisors, was convened by Relate, and involved experienced trainers from Relate and Marriage Care. Thirty-five counsellors took part (30 of whom were female and 5 male), representing six marriage agencies, as follows: Relate (14), Marriage Care (13), Jewish Marriage Council (2), London Marriage Guidance (2), The Asian Family Counselling Service (2) and the African-Caribbean Family Mediation Service (2). Following our usual research methodology, we undertook non-participant observation of the training, and received completed evaluation forms issued to counsellors by Relate. The process by which we collected data from counsellors and supervisors is shown in Figure 13.1.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See de Shazer, S., *Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy*, Norton (1986).

<sup>3</sup> The training programme for the MWMC was discussed in detail in Mitchell, S., Laing, K. and Hooper, D., 'Meeting with a marriage counsellor', in J. Walker (ed.), *Information Meetings and Associated Provisions within the Family Law Act 1996: Third Interim Evaluation Report*, Newcastle Centre for Family Studies (January 1999).

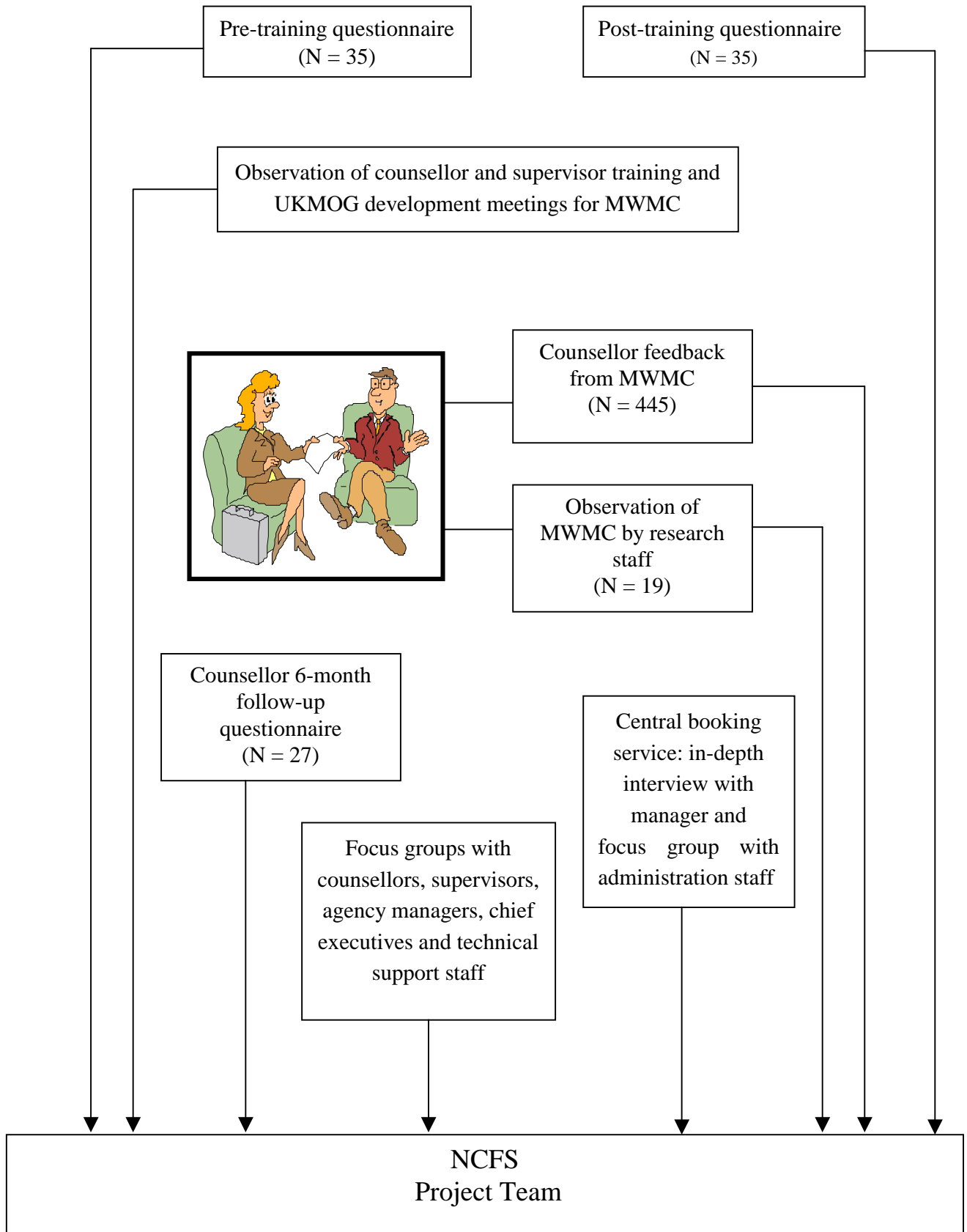


Figure 13.1 Data from counsellors and supervisors in respect of the meeting with a marriage counsellor

### *Using a script*

Although all the counsellors were enthusiastic about the new meeting they expressed anxieties surrounding the use of a script, as this was something they were not used to. The script included a welcome and introduction, and an explanation of the meeting. The meeting then moved into an exploration phase which was designed to enable attendees to look at their options and identify whether counselling might be an appropriate step. To close the meeting, the attendee was given scripted information about the marriage counselling service provided by the agency and asked to indicate their current thinking about how they might wish to proceed.

Counsellors felt that using a script could provide attendees with security, reassurance, familiarity and a framework to enable them to remain solution-focused. On the negative side, they felt that using a script could also be restrictive, insulting and too directive. They did not want to appear to be reciting sentences in parrot fashion. Although many of the counsellors found the novelty of working with a script uncomfortable at first, with practice during the training anxieties were alleviated and they grew to consider the script to be a useful tool for enabling them to work within the boundaries imposed.

### *General reflections*

Overall, the training for the MWMC was very well-received, and the counsellors seemed to value the opportunity to work with colleagues from a mix of agencies. Counsellors harboured some concerns about the apparent speed with which the pilot MWMC was set up and the lack of pre-training preparation, particularly since a very new approach to working with individuals or couples was being tried out. The MWMC was scheduled to last an hour if a couple attended, or forty minutes if a party attended alone. The counsellors had to keep to a script and to pre-determined time boundaries.

### **Putting the MWMC into Practice**

After the introduction of the MWMC, all those who were attending a Model C or F individual meeting, or a Model D group meeting or a Model E CD-ROM meeting, or who had applied for a postal pack, were given a written invitation to attend a MWMC. (The data collection process is shown in Figure 13.2.) A total of 3,465 invitations were given out at information meetings. Those who wanted to take up the offer made arrangements to go to a MWMC by telephoning a central number that got them through to the booking agency located at the Leicestershire pilot. A total of 462 information meeting attendees made appointments to attend a meeting. Some of these opted out and either cancelled their appointment (38) or failed to turn up (19). Consequently, 404 MWMCs took place following attendance at an information meeting, while another 41 followed receipt of a postal pack (see below). This means that 12 per cent of those who received an invitation at an information meeting went on to attend a MWMC.

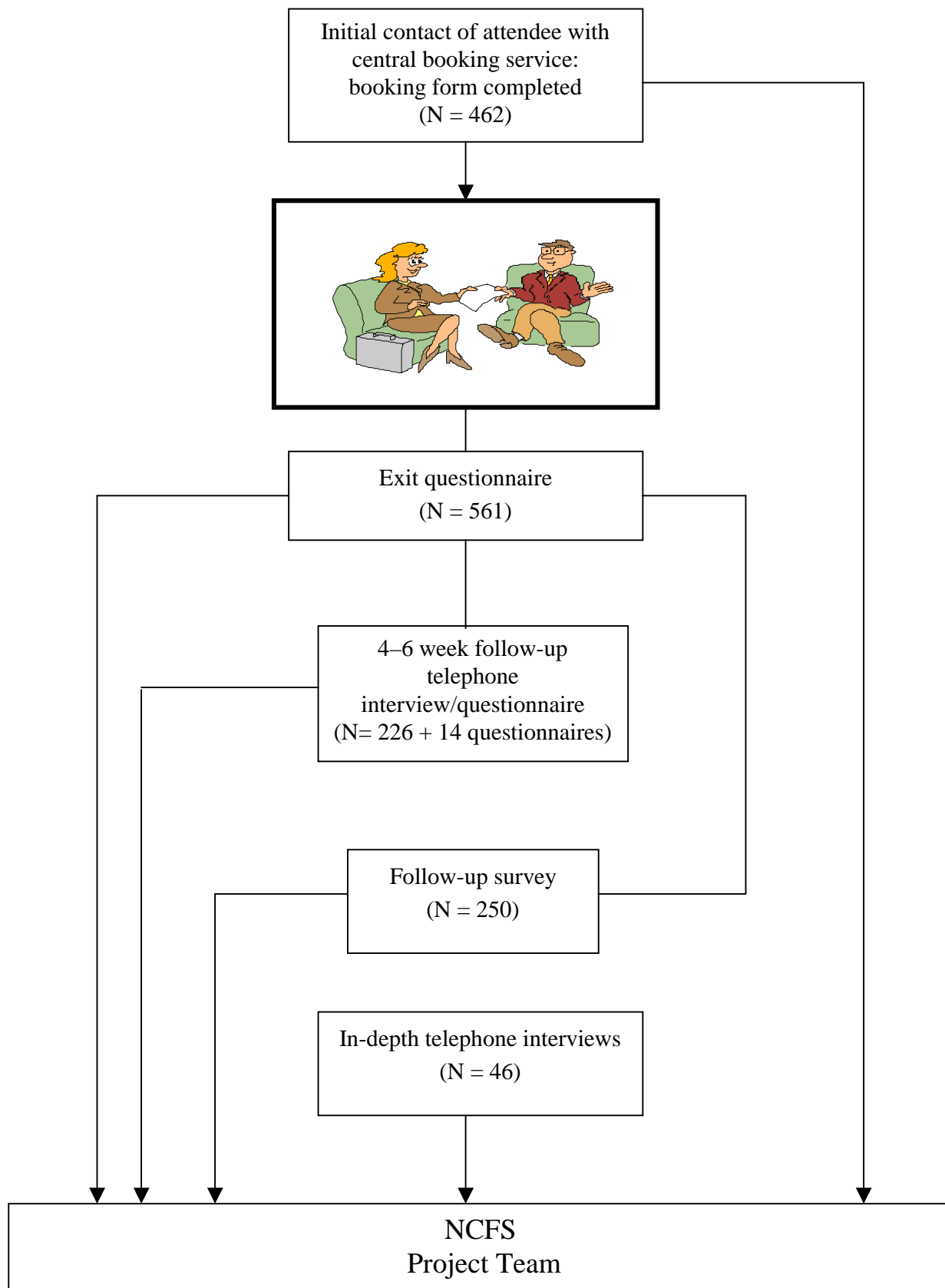


Figure 13.2 Data from those who attended a meeting with a marriage counsellor

There was, however, some variation in take-up between models. Those information meetings that focused specifically on marriage achieved the highest take-up. Seventeen per cent of those who received an invitation at a Model C (N = 268) or Model F (N = 826) meeting took up the offer, whereas take-up rates for the 1,246 Model D attendees and the 1,125 Model E attendees who received invitations were 9 per cent and 11 per cent respectively. Such results need to be interpreted carefully, although the results of logistic regression analysis<sup>4</sup> indicate that the two marriage-focused models were significantly more effective than either Model D or Model E in promoting the MWMC. We note, however, findings reported in the previous chapter which suggest that people who attend the shorter information meetings may go to marriage counselling in the hope of getting more information. It is also evident that the MWMC was more attractive to people who were still living with their spouse than it was to people who were separated, as Table 13.1 shows.

Table 13.1 Take-up of MWMC by residential circumstances of attendees and model

	Living with spouse				Living apart from spouse			
	C %	D %	F %	E %	C %	D %	F %	E %
Attended MWMC	20.6	11.3	17.2	14.3	11.8	7.8	14.9	7.9
Did not attend MWMC	79.4	88.7	82.8	85.7	88.2	92.2	85.1	92.1
Total (100%)	136	503	464	462	127	717	343	620

Chi-squared = 10.72; p = .013. Chi-squared = 16.71; p = .001.

Some invitations to a MWMC were given out at information meetings that were restricted to people who had not petitioned for divorce. However, of those who received an invitation after attending an information meeting, 524 (16%) had already started divorce proceedings, 1,078 (33%) had already consulted a solicitor about divorce and 657 (20%) had already been to counselling. Approximately half of those who received an invitation to a MWMC had been using the information meeting as a first port of call. They had not been to counselling or mediation, nor had they consulted a solicitor or filed for divorce.

When the postal pack study was launched in October 1998, invitations to an MWMC were included in the packs if applicants were not already involved in divorce proceedings. Of the 1,346 people who were sent an invitation through the post, 41 took up the offer of a MWMC. This meant that the invitation was taken up by only 3 per cent of those who had received it through the post, a take-up rate significantly lower than that for people who attended any of the information meetings. In this sense, therefore, it is evident that attending a meeting does make a difference to the take-up of the MWMC.

In total, 4,811 people, of whom 4,281 had not started divorce proceedings, received an invitation to attend a MWMC – either in the post or through their attending an

<sup>4</sup> See Annexe 5, Table A5.26.

Table 13.2 Number of meetings with a marriage counsellor attended in all pilot areas

	London Marriage Guidance*	Jewish Marriage Council*	Asian Family Counselling Service*	African Caribbean Family Mediation*	Relate**	Marriage Care**	Total
London	20	3	–	1	–	–	24
London (postal pack)	13	1	1	2	–	–	17
Solent	–	–	–	–	55	16	71
Leicester and East Midlands	–	–	–	–	47	35	82
East Anglia	–	–	–	–	42	27	69
North East	–	–	–	–	36	10	46
South West	–	–	–	–	34	9	43
Greater Manchester	–	–	–	–	13	7	20
Greater Manchester (postal pack)	–	–	–	–	20	4	24
Merseyside and North Wales	–	–	–	–	36	13	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>445</b>

\* Meetings offered in London pilot area only.

\*\* Meetings offered in all pilot areas except London.

information meeting – and 445 people attended a MWMC. In 116 meetings applicants were accompanied by their spouse, and consequently the number of people who attended a meeting was 561. Women were more than twice as likely as men to attend alone: 216 women and 99 men attended alone.

The counselling agencies used and the areas in which the information meetings were located are shown in Table 13.2. Of the 445 meetings provided, 283 were provided by Relate, 121 by Marriage Care, 33 by London Marriage Guidance Council, 4 by the Jewish Marriage Council, 3 by the Afro-Caribbean Family Mediation Service and one by the Asian Family Counselling Service.

### The Decision To Attend a MWMC

It might be imagined that the decision to attend an MWMC reflected a desire on the part of the attendee to try to save the marriage. Our evaluation shows, however, that such a hypothesis would be far too simplistic. In reality, as Figure 13.3 shows, less than half (48%) of those who went to the MWMC went with the intention of getting help in saving their marriage. Fifteen per cent wanted help in ending the marriage, and almost one in three (32%) were hoping to be helped to come to terms with the fact that their marriage was over.

Only 5 per cent of the 4,281 people who attended an information meeting before they had had started divorce proceedings said they had attended a MWMC in order to save their marriage. The percentages for each of the models were 8 per cent for Model F (N = 826), 6 per cent for Model C (N = 268), 4 per cent for Model E (N = 848) and 3 per cent for Model D (N = 1,000).

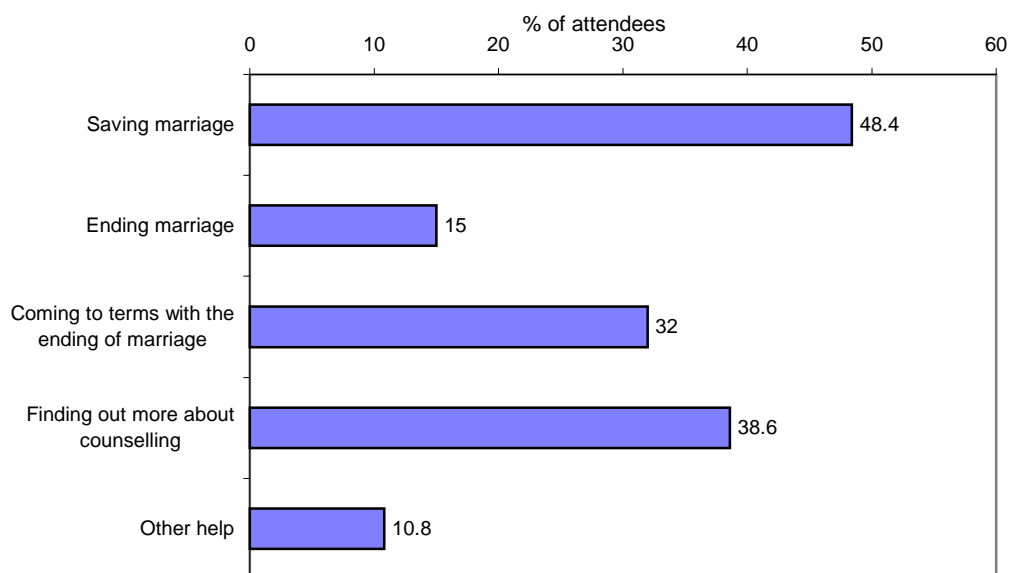


Figure 13.3 Reasons attendees gave for going to a meeting with a marriage counsellor (N = 546)

If we look at the reasons for attendance given by those who went with their spouse, and the reasons given by men and by women who attended alone, we find that people who went to the MWMC with their spouse were more intent on saving their marriages than were those who attended alone. There was also a gender difference. Men were more likely than women to want to save their marriage, whether attending alone or with their spouse. Around a third of women attending alone were seeking marriage-saving help, while 18 per cent were seeking help with regard to ending the marriage and 43 per cent were seeking personal counselling to assist them in the process of coming to terms with the fact that their marriage was over (Figure 13.4).

We received completed exit questionnaires from both partners in respect of 108 meetings. In respect of 42 of these meetings, both spouses indicated that they wanted to be helped to save their marriage. Following 22 meetings neither party wanted to be helped in that way, and at 44 meetings one party wanted to be helped to save the marriage but the other did not. Thus, there were few meetings (42) in which both parties attending were intent on saving their marriage, and the indications are that couple participation does not necessarily mean that marriage saving is on the agenda.

Other reasons for seeking counselling, not cited in Figure 13.4, seem to be distributed evenly according to gender and whether a couple or an individual attended. The reasons given included: getting help with decisions on how to proceed; getting help in talking to children; to 'gain peace'; to obtain legal advice; and to avoid future marriages ending in divorce.

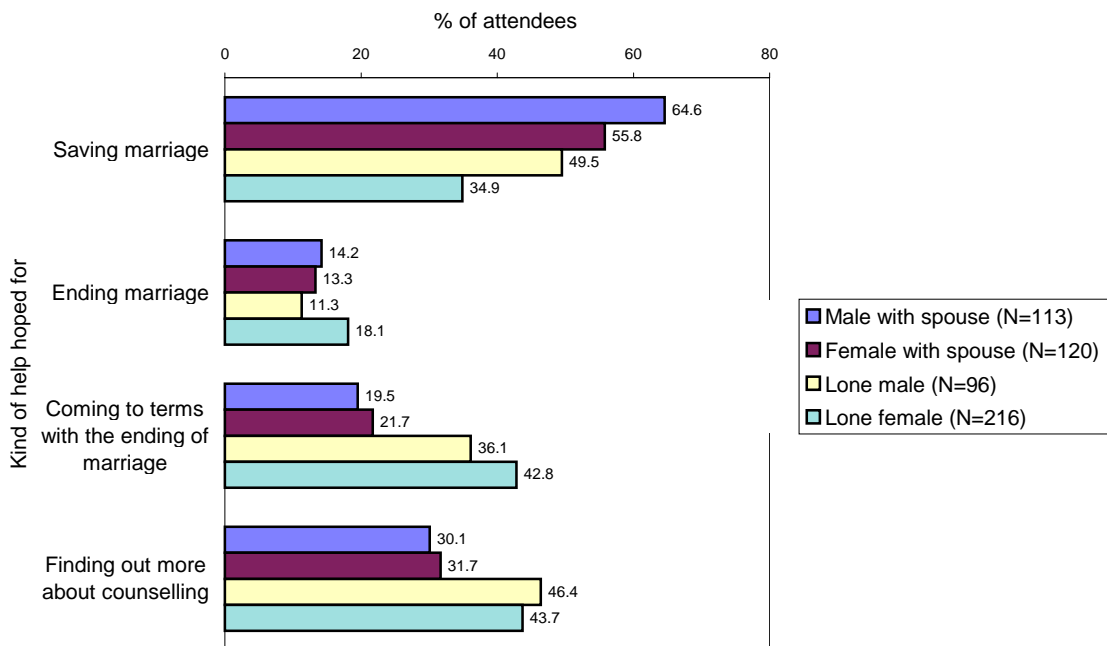


Figure 13.4 Reasons for going to meeting with a marriage counsellor by gender and type of attendee

## Perceived Benefits of Attendance

People who went to a MWMC had expressed a range of emotions beforehand. Some indicated that they felt anxious since they did not know what to expect; others were hopeful that the meeting would provide the magic ingredient which would solve their problems:

I was unsure and anxious. Looking for someone to wave a magic wand and take my problems away. (F)

I thought it would come up with a wonderful answer for me – a miracle cure. (F)

It was like going to the dentist. Pain before cure – not going to be easy. (M)

For some, the ‘magic’ seemed to work:

It has really helped us to communicate. I give my marriage a fifty–fifty chance of surviving now – instead of no chance before. (F)

I feel so glad that I went along. We are getting on so well together. I am so pleased with the way things have turned out. (F)

When the waving of the wand works, however, this does not necessarily mean a marriage is saved. One attendee told us:

It was absolutely 100 per cent perfect. I made an appointment with a solicitor two days later so we can start legal separation. (F)

On the other hand, some people who went to a MWMC were dissatisfied with the meeting because they felt under pressure to save their marriage when that was not what they wanted:

We were at cross-purposes. She was there to help put marriages back together again. I wanted to know how to get a divorce. The woman was very discreet and down to earth, but we were on different wavelengths. I wanted to split – she was trying to put people together again. (M)

I found it frustrating, and upsetting, that the counsellor kept saying the marriage could be saved. (F)

The meeting was not what I wanted. I wanted information about the legal aspects of separation. (F)

Despite some dissatisfaction, the majority (62%) of the 561 people who went to a MWMC indicated afterwards that they would like to have further counselling, albeit for a range of different reasons. Only 6 per cent were sure that they did not want to proceed further, while 32 per cent were uncertain what they wanted to do. As Table 13.3 shows, the meeting apparently had no impact on the likelihood of divorce for 62 per cent of those who attended. It did, however, appear to offer some hope to those who did not want a divorce, and 39 per cent of these people felt divorce was less likely because they had attended the meeting. Furthermore, 25 per cent of those who were unsure what they wanted felt divorce had become less likely, but 14 per cent felt it had become more

likely. Although some of those who were clear that they wanted a divorce had reconsidered their position as a result of the meeting, those who felt divorce was now more likely outnumbered those who felt it was less likely by around four to one.

Table 13.3 Impact of the meeting on attendees' likelihood of divorcing

Feelings about divorce before the meeting	Feelings about divorce after the meeting			total (100%)
	<i>more likely</i> %	<i>less likely</i> %	<i>no change</i> %	
Wanted a divorce	22.6	5.7	71.7	106
Did not want a divorce	5.6	38.5	55.9	179
Uncertain	13.6	25.0	61.4	236
All attendees	12.7	25.7	61.6	521

Chi-squared = 46.4;  $p < .001$ .

Although 42 per cent of MWMC attendees indicated that they did not know before they went how counselling was conducted within the agency that provided the MWMC, most (98%) understood what was on offer after the meeting. In this sense, the MWMC seems to have been successful. Moreover, attendees were generally positive about the experience. For instance, 58 per cent found the meeting very useful and 40 per cent felt it had been fairly useful. Two-thirds indicated that they would definitely recommend it to other people, while 31 per cent indicated that they might recommend it. The positive views expressed at the time of the meeting continued to be reflected in some of the comments included in questionnaires completed at least six months later:

Both the information meeting and the marriage counsellor meeting were very beneficial in helping me to address my feelings at the time when I had not long left my husband. Although I do not see my marriage being saved, the support these services provided was invaluable in keeping me afloat emotionally. (F)

The marriage counselling session [MWMC] was useful. It enabled me to say things to my ex-husband in a safe environment where he had to listen – which he would not have done on our own. We would not have gone for any counselling without this session. (F)

Although most attendees were positive about the MWMC we did receive some negative comments. There was a feeling, for instance, that the meeting was over-structured, and insufficiently responsive to attendees' circumstances:

I didn't find the experience helpful. The ground rules were false and artificial. It needed more flexibility. (F)

The marriage guidance session had an emphasis on the impact of separation/divorce on children. I was keenly aware of this, and said so in the session; indeed I wished to briefly look at my feelings and how angry I felt that the father of my child did not want a relationship with his son (when I passionately wanted this to be the case). Emphasising the impact to me was not helpful because the blurb the counsellor came out with talked about 'had I

looked at the consequences, etc.?’ Of course, I had! ... I felt the counsellor was reading from a prescribed script which bore no relation to what I wanted to discuss. I came out of the session even more angry and very upset. It quite put me off further marriage counselling. (F)

One attendee felt the counsellor was more concerned with the research process than with helping her:

I did not get anything out of the meeting with the marriage counsellor. They seemed a hundred per cent concerned about gathering data for the research project, and not with helping in any meaningful way. I felt conned and very despondent. I desperately need a third party to deal with my situation but do not seem able to get it. (M)

The following comment illustrates the problems that can arise when meetings are structured to suit the needs of the ‘standard’ couple:

Some of the questions did not fit our situation. My spouse is my wife-in-law because I am now a post-operative transsexual woman. The counsellor we saw was completely unable to cope with our situation, and her unprofessional behaviour left my partner and our relationship damaged ... Marriage support for people in our situation is desperately needed both for the non-transsexual spouse and the children. There seems to be no support available for my children, and I feel that they are damaged by our painful experience as a family.

### **The Immediate Impact of the MWMC**

We attempted to conduct telephone interviews with everyone who had attended a MWMC and who had agreed to participate in the research, within a few weeks of their attending. The number of people who consented to further contact totalled 371. Of these, 67 indicated willingness to complete postal questionnaires, but not to be interviewed over the telephone. We were able to telephone 226 people, and we received completed postal questionnaires from a further 14. Hence, we collected data from 43 per cent of those who had attended a meeting.

At the time they were contacted, 53 per cent of the 240 attendees were still living with their spouse. In the period between attending the meeting and our contact with them, 26 people who had been living with their spouse had separated. This was counter-balanced to some extent by the fact that 12 of the 86 people who were separated at the time they attended had returned to live at the same address as their spouse. Overall, there had been little change in residence arrangements between the meeting and the research interview, which is not surprising given that this contact usually took place within six weeks of the meeting.

Almost half of the 240 people contacted indicated that they wished they had been able to attend a MWMC earlier than they did, while 30 per cent felt they had gone at just the right time. Nevertheless, three-quarters said that they were glad they had gone to the meeting. A further indication of how well the meeting was received is the fact that a significant number of attendees said they would have been willing to pay for it. During the pilot, the MWMC was provided free of charge, but more than two-thirds (68%) of those we contacted afterwards indicated that they would have gone even if they had to

pay. The amount that they were willing to pay, however, varied from £5 to £25, with a median suggested payment of £12. Of course, these people indicated a willingness to pay after they had experienced the meeting. There is no way of knowing whether they would have attended if they had known beforehand that they would be required to pay.

Thirty-six per cent of those whom we contacted indicated that after the MWMC they felt that their marriage could be saved, while 52 per cent felt the marriage was definitely over and the remainder were uncertain. Those who had not wanted a divorce when they went to the MWMC seemed most likely to be encouraged by it, and 57 per cent of them felt their marriage could be saved. Just over a third (34%), however, felt that going to the meeting had led them to accept that their marriage was definitely over. Of the 30 people who had previously been uncertain about whether they wanted a divorce, 48 per cent now accepted that the marriage was over while 32 per cent felt it could be saved. It seems that the realisation that a marriage can be saved is not necessarily a source of satisfaction. Of the 86 people who felt their marriage could be saved at the time they were interviewed, 12 indicated that saving the marriage was not the outcome they wanted.

One of the objectives of the MWMC is to encourage people to go on to marriage counselling. When we contacted them, half of the 240 attendees indicated that they were in the process of arranging more counselling, while a similar proportion indicated that they did not intend to go further. The reasons they gave for not going further included the following:

- Too long to wait for an appointment. (4)
- Partner refused to go. (14)
- The MWMC helped to alleviate the problem. (17)
- The costs. (16)
- Didn't think it could help. (45)
- Counsellor said it couldn't help. (3)
- Didn't like the counsellor. (3)

Just under half (43%) of those who were contemplating going on to counselling (N = 115) were hoping to be helped to save their marriage, while 24 per cent were seeking personal counselling, 10 per cent wanted help in understanding their feelings, and 9 per cent were hoping for help in understanding what had gone wrong in their marriage. Some people felt that there was too much emphasis on marriage saving at the MWMC, while others were disappointed that marriage saving was not the only agenda. The following remarks illustrate these contrasting positions:

None of the people, or organisations, I have spoken to have been able to help me with solid information. Everything has been focused on resurrecting the marriage. The [research] questionnaire implies that help in ending the marriage is available – it is not! (M)

When I received the initial material leading to my meeting with a marriage counsellor, the information seemed a little biased towards the breaking up of a marriage rather than reconciliation. My main aim was to resolve my marriage

problems, so I was surprised and disappointed with the information's lean towards dealing with breakup. (F)

### *The counsellors*

There were more female than male counsellors. Consequently, male counsellors conducted only 19 per cent of the meetings. This means it is almost inevitable that some male attendees will have had a female counsellor. In fact, there did not appear to be any attempt to match the gender of the counsellor and the attendee. Women were just as likely as men to have a male counsellor. It seems that men were not concerned about the counsellor's gender. However, eight female attendees who had a male counsellor indicated that they would rather have had a female. This may be an important issue for women who have been abused and/or fear for their safety.

### **The Longer-term Outcome of Attending a MWMC**

The comments attendees made shortly after attending a MWMC suggest general satisfaction. The following were typical:

I liked the counsellor very much, and I was glad she asked me to go back for more counselling. (F)

It helped me to focus on our problems, and to vent what I was feeling about my wife's affair. I have been up and down like a yo-yo. I have been to counselling on my own since then. (M)

In our view, however, the evaluation of the MWMC needs to go beyond the immediate measurement of satisfaction to consider what attendees do afterwards. The key policy questions are: what did people do as a result of the MWMC, and how many of them sought additional counselling help? We also need to know why those who did go on to counselling chose to do so, and what the results of their actions were. We examined these issues by way of a postal questionnaire sent in November 1999 to all attendees who had indicated that they would be willing to participate in further research. We sent out 440 questionnaires and received 250 responses, a response rate of 57 per cent. Of those who responded, 43 per cent were already separated from their spouse when they went to the MWMC, while 26 per cent described themselves as living separately in the same house and 31 per cent said that they and their spouse were living together as husband and wife. Approximately one in four of those who described themselves and their partner as living together as husband and wife indicated that they nevertheless expected their marriage to end.

Not surprisingly, those who were living as husband and wife when they attended the MWMC were more likely than those who had already separated to be still married at the time of the survey;<sup>5</sup> 58 per cent of them were still married, as against 38 per cent of those who were living separately in the same house and 23 per cent of those who were living apart. In all, 97 of the 250 respondents described themselves as still married, while 105 said they were separated, and 48 were divorced. Just 14 per cent of those who were still

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<sup>5</sup> The meetings with a marriage counsellor had taken place during the 12 months beginning July 1998. The survey was held at one point in time (November 1999), and completed questionnaires were returned between November 1999 and February 2000. Thus, the time between the MWMC and the survey varied between 6 and 18 months.

married described themselves as very happy, while 39 per cent were only fairly happy and 47 per cent said they were unhappy. Just 18 per cent of the MWMC attendees told us that they were still married and reasonably happy at the time of the survey. More than a third (39%) of those who were apparently 'still married' said they were intending to divorce.

### *Seeking help*

At times of crisis people tend to seek help from a range of different sources, both from within their personal networks and externally. The majority of survey respondents told us they had had sought external help concerning their marital circumstances since they went to the MWMC. As Table 13.4 shows, solicitors were the most common source of such help, and 61 per cent of respondents had consulted one. Those who had tended to be satisfied with the service provided and 82 per cent said they found the solicitor helpful. Almost half of the respondents (46%) had gone on to discuss their circumstances with a marriage counsellor, and 74 per cent of them found the counsellor helpful. The number of people who had discussed their marital problems with their GP confirms findings from other research about the importance of the medical profession in the process of relationship breakdown;<sup>6</sup> 38 per cent had sought the help of their GP and 74 per cent of them suggested that the GP had been helpful. Eighteen per cent of attendees had since been to mediation and 59 per cent of them found it helpful, suggesting a lower rate of satisfaction with mediation than with solicitors and marriage counsellors.

Table 13.4 Sources of help and how helpful users found them (N = 250)

	Used and found them helpful	Used and found them unhelpful	Did not use
	%	%	%
Solicitor	49.6	11.2	39.2
Marriage counsellor	34.4	12.0	53.6
GP	28.0	9.6	62.4
Mediator	10.4	7.2	82.4
Member of the clergy	9.2	5.2	85.6
Social worker	1.2	3.6	95.2

### *Contacting a counselling agency*

Forty-two per cent of respondents contacted a counselling agency in order to arrange a counselling appointment after attending a MWMC. The majority of these contacted Relate (68%), while 18 per cent contacted Marriage Care. Other agencies contacted included London Marriage Guidance Council (3%) and the Jewish Marriage Council (3%). Two people said they used 'Christian counselling', one used an agency they referred to as 'Springs Counselling', and another contacted an agency that provided

<sup>6</sup> McCarthy, P., Walker, J. and Kain, J., *Telling It As It Is: The Client Experience of Relate Counselling*, Newcastle Centre for Family Studies (1998), p. 97.

domestic violence counselling. Sixty per cent of those who arranged further counselling contacted the same agency that had provided the MWMC.

Two of those who had contacted Relate indicated that they were not offered an appointment. One of these claimed that she did get a letter offering an appointment some weeks later, while the other told us that she had declined an offer of appointment because of the distance she would have to travel. Of those who were offered an appointment, 14 per cent got one within a week of making contact, 69 per cent within two weeks and 90 per cent within four weeks. Unfortunately, 10 per cent of those seeking counselling had to wait more than four weeks for a counselling appointment. Four of those who had to wait more than four weeks did not seem to mind, but the other six indicated that they did mind having to wait so long.

Two people did not keep their appointment, and indicated that this was because of the cost involved. However, one of them indicated that she was also unable to arrange childcare, while the other told us that her partner would not go anyway. Most of those who went to counselling (62%) did so alone, and half of them indicated that they would rather have attended with their spouse.

### *Reasons for going to counselling*

We asked the 101 people who attended a counselling appointment why they had decided to go to counselling. As Figure 13.5 shows, just under half (47%) indicated that they had gone in the hope of improving the relationship with their spouse. Twenty-eight per cent were hoping for help in ending their relationship. The most common reason for going to counselling was to get help in understanding the relationship, while more than half of those who went to a counselling appointment were hoping to understand themselves better. Forty-four per cent were hoping to be helped to come to terms with the way their family had changed.

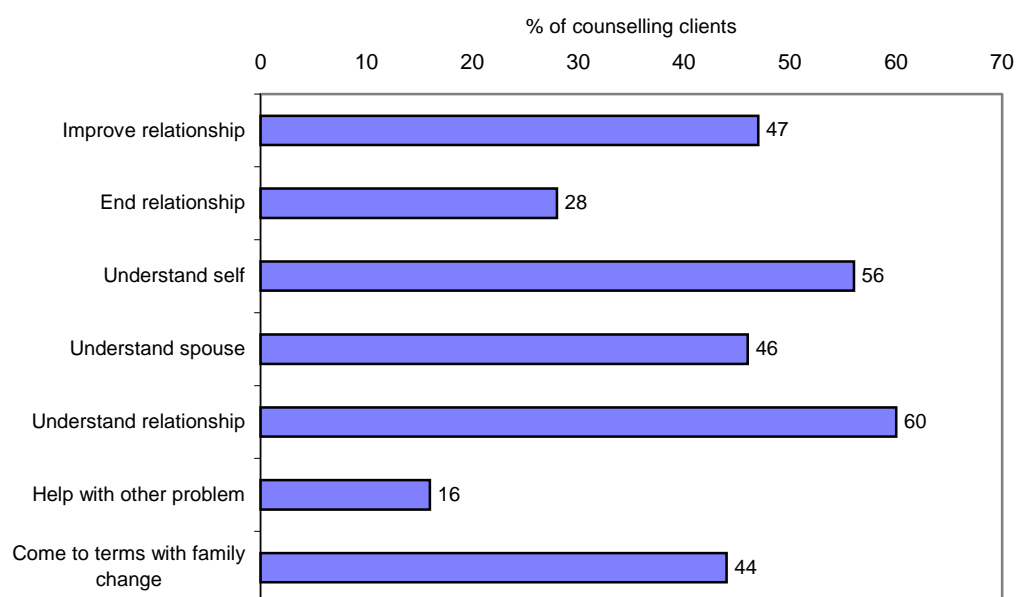


Figure 13.5 Attendees' reasons for going to counselling (N = 101)



### *The first counselling appointment*

Of the 101 people who said they went to a counselling appointment, 36 per cent indicated that they found their first interview very helpful, while 50 per cent found it fairly helpful and 14 per cent said it had not been at all helpful. Almost three-quarters (73%) went to a second appointment. Not surprisingly, those who found the first appointment helpful were more likely to go for a second, but half of those who described the first meeting as being of no help at all still went to a second one. Two of those who did not go to a second appointment indicated that the first meeting had solved their problem. The most common reason given for not going back, referred to by 10 of those who did not have a second interview, was that counselling would not help. Nine people did not go back because their spouse refused to participate, while six people indicated that they were put off by the cost, and two indicated they had to wait too long for a second appointment. The completed questionnaires contained a number of remarks about cost, such as the following:

It would have been nice to have been able to afford proper counselling sessions. I am employed part-time and I am low paid, and couldn't possibly justify the expense for myself when I have other responsibilities. I have found the whole experience of divorcing extremely stressful, and at times have hardly been able to cope with the worry and pressures of everything. I have sought no professional help, apart from employing a solicitor, and I feel like I am living in a nightmare. The information meeting was good, but there should be more things like this available to people. (F)

I would have liked further meetings with a marriage counsellor but, as I am on benefits, I would have found the costs hard to pay. (F)

Marriage counselling should be free to all. I would have attended sessions but for the cost involved. Even a minimum donation of £5 can be expensive. If counselling costs, it adds additional expense to those who are having difficulty making ends meet, and for the person who is left to foot the bill. (M)

I feel very strongly that marriage counselling should be free for everyone. It is such a traumatic time when your marriage is failing, you need as much help and support as possible early on. I couldn't afford £25 per session. I don't work and I am not on benefit, but I do have a small amount of savings. I didn't feel that I wanted to spend my savings so early on when my future was so unstable, but you have to pay and I couldn't afford it. (F)

This last woman did eventually get access to free counselling, telling us:

I have only just discovered Marriage Care, which is free if you don't work, but it has taken me eleven months to find it. (F)

One wonders why she could not have been helped to discover Marriage Care when she went to her MWMC. Although the counsellors are only required to provide information about their own agency, it may be more appropriate for attendees to be informed of the various options available to them and their respective costs should they choose to go down the counselling route.

### Completing counselling

The number of appointments attended by the 76 people who went beyond the first appointment ranged between 2 and 25; the median number of appointments attended was six. More than half (53%) went to all the counselling sessions alone, while 35 per cent went to all or most of the sessions with their spouse and 12 per cent were accompanied by their spouse at some of the sessions.

As Figure 13.6 shows, just 19 per cent of those who attended counselling indicated that it had helped them to save their marriage. Indeed, out of the 250 MWMC attendees who responded to our follow-up survey, only 18 (7%) said they had gone on to marriage counselling and saved their marriage as a result. There are, however, several ways in which counselling may facilitate saved marriages. The experience of counselling encouraged one couple to communicate better, and to stay together, primarily because they shared negative views about the counselling process:

Although attending marriage counselling sessions spurred me and my husband into thinking more about saving our marriage, we actually gained more from our discussions out of the session than we did in the sessions. We found our marriage guidance counsellor was looking too deeply into our psychological backgrounds in order to answer his own theories about why our marriage was breaking down. Eventually, due to the above, we stopped going to see the counsellor, and instead used the time together to discuss our problems and feelings, and used the money to go out or have a meal together. (F)



Figure 13.6 Counselling outcomes (N = 95)

The following comment, however, describes the saving of a marriage in which the input of counselling was more positive:

Having been married to the same person for eighteen years you think you know someone, but after counselling it helped me and my husband to see

things from a different angle, which helped me to understand what was going wrong. I would not say everything is back to normal, but I try to understand what is happening if things start to slide, and we are trying to arrange more time together to work things out and to see each other's point of view. Therefore, I feel that our marriage definitely benefited from the help we received as my husband had moved out, and I assumed that we were heading for divorce. I don't believe, however, that if both of us had not gone together ... we would be back together now. (F)

In the following case, counselling offered the prospect of reconciliation, although that seemed extremely unlikely when the wife began counselling alone. This case illustrates the problem of finding the right time for both partners to be able to work together with a shared agenda:

Initially I attended approximately eight sessions alone, as my husband refused to go. At the end of these sessions, I had adjusted to the inevitability of divorce. Then he decided he would see someone, and saw a different person alone a couple of times, after which I went with him. These sessions are still ongoing, and I feel a little more confident that something can be salvaged, but I feel that there is a long way to go before any amount of trust can be regained. I feel for the first time that he is making some effort to put things right. (F)

Two-thirds of those who went to counselling indicated that they were glad they had done so. Sixteen per cent of attendees, however, said they wished they had gone sooner. One of them told us:

Personally, I knew deep down that my marriage had ended and that is why I sought counselling. But it was too late then. How can you make someone fall back in love, or even respect them, after the damage has been done? (F)

In common with those of other research that focuses on relationship counselling,<sup>7</sup> our findings suggest that the most common benefits were those concerning person-centred issues. For instance, 72 per cent of those who went to counselling were helped to gain a better self-understanding, and it is clear that counselling can help people come to terms with the emotional trauma of divorce. One counselling user told us how she had benefited from the whole package consisting of attending an information meeting, a meeting with a marriage counsellor and counselling, although her marriage was clearly over at the time she began the process:

I found both the information meeting and the introductory meeting with a marriage counsellor extremely helpful. Although my husband and I had already separated, I felt at a loss as to how to deal with the situation I had found myself in, and I needed someone to point me in the right direction. I then went on to have several sessions with an excellent counsellor who really set me on the road to recovery. (F)

Figure 13.6 demonstrates the wide-ranging impact of counselling. It is clear that counselling helps some people to save their marriage and others to end their marriage and/or come to terms with the fact that their marriage is over. It can also help people develop an understanding of themselves, their partner and their relationship, and can help

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<sup>7</sup> McCarthy, Walker and Kain (1998), *op. cit.*

to minimise the impact of divorce on children. The fact that it fulfils all of these functions, however, might mean that it does not do as well as it might if it focused on a specific objective. The multi-purpose approach of relationship counselling also makes it difficult to evaluate effectiveness. In answer to a question about the quantification of preventative work, Relate's senior research officer commented:

How we measure our success depends on what it is we are aiming to achieve. Do we want to reduce the number of people who get divorced? Or do we want to reduce the acrimony and distress of divorce? Are we aiming to help couples stay together, or to grow and develop personally? Are we about maintaining the status quo in relationships or are we about easing the transitions?<sup>8</sup>

This appropriately describes the problems connected with evaluation of services in which all kinds of outcomes might be regarded as positive. Moreover, Relate's senior research officer raises important questions about the function of marriage support services, questions which clearly need to be addressed before implementation of Part II of the FLA.

### *Evaluating relationships*

As Figure 13.6 shows, almost a third of those who went on to counselling after a MWMC managed to achieve an improved relationship with their spouse, although only 19 per cent said they had saved their marriage. Of the 29 people who indicated that they had improved their relationship, three were divorced and seven were separated at the time of the survey. This suggests that counselling can help people to improve the quality of relationships even when they live apart, although the majority of people who were living apart and attended counselling did not claim to have improved their relationship.

In an attempt to extend our understanding of the impact of counselling on the quality of relationships, we asked seven questions with fixed responses located on a five-point Likert scale. The questions were combined to create a single scale of measurement, which we have labelled 'quality of relationship'. We summed scores on the seven individual variables to produce a scale which had a relatively high degree of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) and a distribution that was approximately normal. Analysis with this variable revealed little, however, about differences between groups of respondents or about the impact of counselling. We found that the most important determinant of the quality of relationship was simply the state of the marriage. Not surprisingly, those who were still married and intending to stay that way had a significantly closer relationship with their spouse than those who were married and intending to divorce and those who were already either divorced or separated. There was no evidence to suggest that those who went to counselling had a better-quality relationship than those who had no counselling contact beyond the MWMC, irrespective of whether they went to counselling alone or with their spouse.

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<sup>8</sup> *Relate News*, no. 61 (February 2000), p. 3.

