

## Chapter 16

### Devising and Delivering a New Service

*Janet Walker, Susan Mitchell and Douglas Hooper*

... when Part II of the Family Law Act is implemented, many more people will become aware of marriage support through the information meetings ... An increase in demand from this source therefore seems certain ...

In order to meet this demand, I consider it desirable that the voluntary sector should develop strongly, maintaining a lead role in the development of new ideas, and of new practice, training and service provision.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter we examine the meeting with a marriage counsellor from the point of view of the agencies which delivered it, and consider the extent to which it fits into their current practice and programme of services. The data in this chapter were derived from a series of focus group meetings with chief executives of the marriage agencies involved, the agency managers of the participating agencies in the pilot areas, counsellors who delivered the MWMC, and the supervisors appointed to oversee the work of the counsellors. We also interviewed the manager and administrative staff of the Leicester call centre.

#### The Marriage Support Agencies

Four main agencies currently provide the majority of marriage support and relationship counselling services in England and Wales. These are: Relate; Marriage Care; London Marriage Guidance Council; and the Jewish Marriage Council. For some time, these agencies have been moving away from work aimed solely at preventing marriage breakdown, towards work with a broader focus on enabling individuals and couples to identify their problems and then to make decisions that are right for them. The saving of marriages has become a rather less prominent but no less desirable goal, while offering help and support for adult couple relationships, irrespective of marital status, has become the primary objective.

After the Second World War, three agencies took the lead in helping troubled marriages: Relate (formerly the National Marriage Guidance Council); the Tavistock Marital Studies Institute (formerly the Family Discussion Bureau as part of the Family Welfare Association); and Marriage Care (formerly the Catholic Marriage Guidance Council). These agencies decided that their initial task was to offer help to those couples and families who were coming together again in the period following the end of the war in 1945/6. The agencies believed that couples needed help in adjusting to peace-time circumstances. The services offered were strongly educational with therapeutic ideas – but this was therapy with heavy overtones of medical intervention rather than psychological expertise. In the debate on the Denning Commission (1947)<sup>2</sup> claims were

---

<sup>1</sup> Sir Graham Hart, *The Funding of Marriage Support*, The Lord Chancellor's Department (1999), pp. 17, 18, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Final Report of the Committee on Procedure in Matrimonial Causes (The Denning Report), Cmd. 7024, HMSO (1947).

made that technical expertise was not necessary. All that was required was a good sense of sincere affection. This common-sense philosophy did not survive and it was agreed that some training was necessary, but initially it was fashioned towards the diagnosis of the couple's problem and then onward referral to a professional expert. The word 'guidance' therefore seemed appropriate for this activity, which also had an under-emphasised focus on conciliation or reconciliation – the two were not distinguished.

Quite early on in the development of the marriage support services, the Family Discussion Bureau began to develop an explicitly psychoanalytic approach to marital problems. This approach was seen as being the best way to help most couples, rather than using educational principles. But the emphasis on education and guidance remained strong in other agencies – in particular in the National Marriage Guidance Council.

It soon became clear that despite a temporary drop in divorce figures after the post-war surge, the rate of divorce was rising inexorably. In this context, the other agencies developed their services on the principle of offering counselling to troubled couples. Education remained an important part of the service offered, but was no longer seen as the sole means of trying to save marriages from breaking down. The expertise which the agencies developed was that of helping couples to identify their own problems – often by focusing on their past experiences – and then to explore ways of changing the relationship. Although there was a clear emphasis on the interactional processes, there was an equal emphasis on the inner world of two individuals. Clearly the idea of the counsellor as an educational expert on marital problems able to work improvements by educational means had largely disappeared – even though there was little compelling evidence that the psychoanalytic counselling service which was offered in its place was necessarily more effective.

This new emphasis on therapeutic counselling reflected the broad social shift from institutional marriage towards companionate marriage, for which counselling was deemed to be appropriate. Parallel with this, the marriage organisations were shifting away from representing a movement with a dominant interest in social welfare towards becoming agencies providing professional services for individuals and couples whose relationships were in difficulty. In this context, the perception that when people go to see a counsellor some marriages may be saveable while others are not seems to be an unhelpful dichotomy for the marriage support agencies, primarily because they do not see marriage saving as their primary or exclusive task. There is no apt polar opposite of the notion of saveability, although the concept of irrecoverability might be closest to the meaning required. It may be that the notion of time is more helpful: the marital relationship may reach a point beyond which it cannot usefully continue. In reality, one or both partners is likely to define this end-point in time. The Family Law Act preserves the right of partners to determine the point in time at which they might access information, and seeks to ensure that either or both of them should reflect and consider a decision that the marriage is irrecoverable. While the FLA does not seek to define what may be saveable, there is an implicit assumption that saveable marriages are capable of identification. This assumption was given status through the meeting with a marriage counsellor when the Lord Chancellor's Department drew up the guidelines in order that one of three outcomes would be achieved. Two of these outcomes refer to attendees working on their marriage, or attending marriage counselling with a view to saving the marriage. The MWMC, therefore, provides some opportunity for proactive work in terms of saving marriages, albeit late in the day for many couples.

## **The Aims and Objectives of the Agencies Involved in the MWMC**

Six agencies participated in the delivery of the MWMC. Two of the marriage agencies involved are 'faith' agencies, namely the Jewish Marriage Council and Marriage Care. The others, Relate, the London Marriage Guidance Council, the Asian Family Counselling Service and the Afro-Caribbean Counselling Service, are secular. Each organisation has a statement of aims or objectives, and we summarise them here.

### *Marriage Care*

Marriage Care has a simple mission statement:

Marriage Care embraces and holds true to the Church's vision of marriage as a vocation of love, with the power to transform individual lives and to serve as a bedrock to a stable society.

The agency's purpose is to help people prepare for, achieve and also sustain successful marriages and to support them should their marriages break down. Its commitment is to honour individuals and it is committed to a belief in marriage as the prime relationship through which people can mature and grow. It aims to support marriages at all stages of their development, especially in times of difficulty, through relationship counselling and complementary services. The mission statement is firmly embedded in the Catholic Church's ethic of marriage, although it does not confirm the view that marriage is expected to be a lifelong union. Supporting and sustaining marriage is clearly of dominant importance to the agency, which delivers services through 64 local centres, which are nationally organised.

### *The Jewish Marriage Council*

The Jewish Marriage Council describes its aims as being to:

- provide a confidential counselling service for any personal, family and marital problem
- raise public awareness of the values and benefits of Jewish marriage and family life
- provide appropriate services to support individuals at the end of relationships and beyond
- give advice and, when difficulties occur, negotiate between individuals on the religious divorce (a 'get')

These aims underscore the importance of Jewish marriage and family life, reflect the Jewish values of communal responsibility (*arevoot*) and care and concern for others (*chosed*), and accord with the religious authority of the Chief Rabbi. There is no statement in either the aims or the principles of the agency about preserving marriage, although the Jewish religious ethic would strongly support that position. Although the preservation of marriage is implicit, the agency offers support to those ending

relationships and those negotiating a religious divorce. Jewish Marriage Guidance offers services through three centres in London and Manchester.

#### *The Asian Family Counselling Service*

The Asian Family Counselling Service, based and operating in London, is a generic service and offers counselling for 'all members of the Asian community above the age of 14'. Its mission statement indicates that it responds to the needs of people by providing counselling and other forms of support to 'individuals, couples or families' who have problems in their marital or family relationships. It aims 'to enhance the physical and mental well-being of the Asian community [via] confidential counselling in the client's own language'. The agency also addresses issues connected with arranged and forced marriages.

#### *The African Caribbean Family Mediation Service*

The African Caribbean Family Mediation Service offered the MWMC as an extension of its mediation and other services, in conjunction with London Marriage Guidance Council. It responds to the needs of the black community in London by 'providing a marital counselling service ... to strengthen family life in the African and Caribbean communities'. This agency has a broad remit in providing support to the black community through a range of other services, including its family mediation service, child contact centre and men's counselling service, and its home/school mediation service.

#### *London Marriage Guidance Council*

Until 1994 London Marriage Guidance Council was part of the National Marriage Guidance Council (now Relate). It operates in central and some inner London areas. It offers separate counselling services for relationship difficulties and sexual problems, and for people contemplating separation and divorce. Its mission is to

provide and promote the highest quality counselling to help couples and individuals resolve difficulties in their relationships.

The agency believes that the couple relationship is central to the stability of the family, but recognises that although couples 'reach out for lifelong relationships' many find them difficult to sustain. It also accepts that counselling may enable some relationships to continue, but that it can also minimise hurt and damage when relationships end.

Apart from the title of the agency there is little if anything in its public statements about marriage *per se*. In the light of this it is interesting that it has retained its former title. The core theme is the resolution of couple difficulties, by a number of means, which can lead either to continuity or dissolution. In its leaflet on divorce/separation counselling there is a vigorous assertion that if the couple decide to restore the marriage the counsellor will render 'every support' in helping to do this. In these cases the agency is apparently firm about its role in trying to save a marriage, whereas in other cases it appears to be neutral as to the outcome.

## *Relate*

Relate is by far the largest of the marriage support agencies with around a hundred and twenty centres spread throughout England and Wales. The agency offers a range of services, the core of which is the couple counselling service, but which also include psychosexual therapy and relationship education. Although each centre is organised and managed autonomously, Relate is required to abide by the federal membership agreements which determine service provision and quality standards. In addition each centre also accepts the Statement of Common Purpose of Relate, which describes Relate's role as being 'to help people build better couple relationships'. This is to be achieved by:

- enhancing the quality of relationships
- helping relationships and marriages to withstand pressures leading to breakdown
- limiting the damage accompanying failing relationships and divorce to increase the prospect for further relationships

Relate believes in the importance of commitment, sexual understanding and (for children) freedom from conflict. Counselling is described as being available to help people who are having problems and who want to work them out, or who want to separate or whose relationship has ended. The emphasis is clearly on relationships, which includes marriage. Relate has the least-focused agency statement as regards marriage in particular, and appears to be directed at troublesome relationship experiences generally.

## *Mixed agendas*

The two faith agencies (Marriage Care and Jewish Marriage Council) come closest to the concept of marriage saving in their aims, but do this primarily through appealing to an underlying religious ethic. Nevertheless, these agencies too place an emphasis on providing help with troubled relationships irrespective of the persons' marital status. In other words, they take a broader view of the aims of counselling than might be anticipated in the FLA and the MWMC. Nevertheless, they all embraced the task set during the pilots of developing and testing a new solution-focused approach to helping people make decisions about their marriage.

## **Charges for Services**

There is considerable variation in the policies of the agencies with respect to charging for counselling services. Marriage Care offers a completely free service, although clients are encouraged to make a donation if they wish. The Jewish Marriage Council makes no charge for an initial interview, but clients are asked for a contribution in subsequent interviews, based on a sliding income scale. The contribution requested goes from a £10 minimum to a £40 maximum in London.

London Marriage Guidance asks clients to make a contribution based on a sliding scale ranging from £1.50 per £1,000 gross income to a maximum of £40 per session. Relate leaves each local centre to determine its own charges, but the national guidelines indicate that all clients are expected to pay according to their means (generally between £10 and

£40 per session). The Asian and African Caribbean agencies offer a service which is largely free, although the Asian service charges on a sliding scale for evening and weekend counselling sessions.

### **Organisational Issues**

In the initial stages, chief executives of the participating marriage counselling organisations admitted to being fairly sceptical about the concept of the MWMC. They described the relationship between their organisations and the Lord Chancellor's Department as complicated, and had expected it to be more straightforward than it turned out to be. Describing the new service as 'unplanned, too rushed, and not thought through', they nevertheless saw it as an opportunity to offer something new. Although they recognised the MWMC as a new service, all chief executives agreed that the provision of the service was within the remit of the work already carried out by their agencies. Overall, they expected a low take-up of the meetings.

Agency managers, however, initially expected that their agencies would contact clients directly to make appointments and that they would be responsible for administration, rather than the MWMC being operated through a central booking system. They also predicted that it would be difficult to arrange appointments and that it would be time-consuming, often owing to unfamiliarity with venues. In practice this proved not to be the case. They anticipated also that there would be geographical problems with venues being so widespread, and they expressed concern about whether clients would be prepared to travel in order to take up appointments. Indeed, agency managers offering the service in the more rural areas felt the need for twice the number of counsellors to run an effective and efficient service.

There were some organisational difficulties to be overcome resulting from the speed at which the project was set up. That the service was expected to be up and running within a very short space of time led to a blurring of roles, with agencies unsure of who was supposed to be doing what. This, together with unclear practice guidelines as to the selection process for counsellors and issues connected with counsellor payments when clients did not keep their appointments, were problems that perhaps could have been avoided had there been a longer period for planning the new service.

Flexibility and adaptability, both within and between organisations, appeared to be the key to the smooth running of the new service. At times there appeared to be unclear boundaries between lines of accountability, particularly with reference to quality control and the handling of complaints. In addition, using venues for meetings that were not agency venues and which were therefore unfamiliar posed specific organisational difficulties, as did financial arrangements between the Lord Chancellor's Department and local services. All the agency managers wanted clearer routes for financial accountability. Payment for the MWMC service was routed through the information meeting pilots, with different pilots operating different systems, which sometimes caused difficulty for agency managers. Areas of management accountability for the MWMC varied considerably within and between organisations. For the smaller agencies management accountability was not really an issue. Most agency managers agreed that they made use of their Local Interdisciplinary Forum set up by the local information meeting pilot for discussing any issues arising. All the agency managers recognised the formal lines of accountability between themselves and the Lord Chancellor's Department. Some also suggested feeling accountable to the central booking service, and one or two commented that

there was, at times, a lack of flexibility/understanding from the central booking service regarding operational issues.

Generally, the MWMC was thought by agency managers to complement the services already offered by their organisations. They did, however, feel that the system for clients who wished to proceed into counselling needed to be carefully considered. As some said, 'How many times do clients need to tell their story?' This was an issue raised by many of those who attended the MWMC, as the personal accounts given in Chapters 14 and 15 have shown.

Chief executives acknowledged the bureaucracy 'from outside, with the Lord Chancellor's Department creating the outcome measures'. They suggested that if the MWMC was to become a nationally available service, it should not be linked solely to the Family Law Act 1996 but should be offered in a similar format to that of Relate's consultation with a counsellor.

### **Service Delivery and Planning**

Chief executives of the agencies involved were clearly in favour of operating the new service via a central booking system. In their view, it was important

to have a separate telephone number as it distinguishes the MWMC from other services, is cost efficient and is better than individuals ringing agencies directly.

They did question whether the central booking system should be available for legally-aided attendees only. Overall, agency managers were very positive about operating through a central booking service, making comments such as:

Clients don't have to phone the agency – this removes the stigma attached to contacting a marriage counselling agency.

Managers from Marriage Care had experience of this type of system since they already operate through one central number; one of them described the central booking service as 'an excellent resource which took away the hassle'. Many agency managers felt that using one nationally recognised number gets the service better known. Most of the time, they experienced booking appointments in this way as, in the words of one, a 'slick process, depending on how many venues were on offer and the location of the venues'. Despite the generally positive views, however, agency managers identified some negative aspects of operating through a central booking system. At times, arranging meetings could be a resource-costly process on account of the need for numerous telephone calls to the central booking service, which took time. Counselling agencies did not make appointments directly with the client. As the project was client-led, the central booking service often needed immediate responses to requests for appointments and clients were not necessarily asked for alternatives, all of which could lengthen the booking process quite considerably. There was a suggestion that perhaps the central booking service could have been better equipped, with more resources such as fax machines and e-mail facilities, which could have helped the process to run a little more smoothly. Deadlines for returning material to the central booking service were tight and on occasion agency managers experienced some difficulty managing these.

Chief executives recognised the impact the MWMC might have on existing resources, primarily in terms of time for training and recruitment of counsellors and supervisors. They also raised the issue of implementation and education of the public (including the need to pay particular attention to the specific needs of ethnic minority groups), since they felt there was a danger of losing scarce resources to the MWMC, particularly in smaller agencies. This might have the effect of marginalising those agencies and therefore raising issues about quality control and accountability. Chief executives suggested that a way forward could be to create a separate agency specifically to deliver this meeting. Agency managers did not consider that the MWMC made a significant impact on their resources, however. Occasionally there were increased demands on the agency administrative staff if there was a specific deadline to meet, which could interrupt the normal flow of administrative work. There was no impact on counsellor resources, since provision in most instances had been adequately made. Indeed, the discipline of the tight turn-around as regards offering appointments and completing necessary paperwork was considered to have a positive impact on some counsellors.

Chief executives and agency managers agreed that inter-agency collaboration and co-operation throughout the project had been a positive factor. As regards the MWMC itself, the fact that it was free and time-focused, and met the requirements of the FLA 1996, was something they also considered positive. Nevertheless they did suggest changes to the format and structure of the meeting, and some of them felt that it might be useful to offer the MWMC before, rather than after, an information meeting. Some attendees had expressed the same opinion.

Chief executives could see no problem in attendees accessing separate agencies, one for the MWMC and a different one if they proceeded to counselling. Although different agencies have different policies and charge rates, they did not consider this to be problematic. They suggested a leaflet be incorporated into the information pack clearly stating the options on offer and the policies adopted by the different marriage counselling agencies. There were differences of opinion, however, between agency managers as regards the use of a different agency to continue counselling. Some felt that there would be issues of confidentiality if notes from the MWMC had to be transferred to a different agency for ongoing counselling. Others, however, likened this to obtaining a prescription from a doctor and taking it to any supplier, and could not see this method as being a problem.

Many agency managers were uncomfortable with the issue of 'fast-tracking' MWMC clients into continued counselling. Ethical concerns were raised about 'queue jumping'. Marriage Care, for example, would expect to have a corporate policy on fast-tracking as it operates as a national organisation. Relate Centres, on the other hand, operating as autonomous agencies, expected that policy in this area would be established by each individual centre.

### **Practice and Policy Issues**

Chief executives and agency managers felt there had been some impact on their general agency policies as a result of the MWMC and its solution-focused approach. They recognised a need for all their counsellors to have some understanding of what happens in a MWMC and of the need to raise awareness of the MWMC in counsellor training sessions. The solution-focused approach posed a challenge to normal agency practices and therefore raised the issue of which counsellors should undertake this particular work.

All of them agreed that the MWMC could and should be provided only by trained, experienced and practising marital counsellors who understood marital issues and were used, in the words of one, to 'dealing with messiness'. They perceived the MWMC as being different from individual counselling since the focus was explicitly on the couple and their marriage.

Everyone believed that there should be common selection criteria, with an accrediting agency (selection board) and an accredited course for those delivering the MWMC. Chief executives felt that if the MWMC is to be implemented, private counsellors could be employed to deliver it providing they met the selection criteria and were supervised by agency supervisors. Supervision for counsellors was considered necessary, although agency managers thought that it did not have to take the form of a one-to-one session as is current counselling practice. Group supervision sessions were suggested, and it was pointed out that in an implemented system when many more MWMCs would be conducted, one supervision session for every ten meetings (as occurred during the pilots) might not be needed. Access to a supervisor might suffice, and this could perhaps be supplemented by three to four one-to-one supervisory sessions a year.

All the chief executives were convinced that the UK Marriage Organisations Group, of which they are members, should continue in order to develop a consortium of agencies (perhaps with a National Executive) to enable the MWMC to employ peripatetic counsellors who could respond to specific needs and requests on an inter-agency basis. In order to execute this, a central booking agency could co-ordinate and map the availability of individual counsellors within a particular area. For the future, chief executives wanted strategic funding to cover the quality-assured delivery of the MWMC across the board. In their view, the service must be properly costed and understood by all concerned. The analysis of costs, which is the subject of a separate report,<sup>3</sup> suggests that the unit cost of providing an individual with a MWMC would be between £39 and £70. There is scope for reducing this considerably in a national system with a much higher throughput. These costs would only be incurred by the state, however, with respect to those attendees who are entitled to public funding through the Legal Services Commission. Other attendees would, presumably, have to pay for the meeting themselves. There is no way of knowing how many will attend a MWMC under those circumstances. We suspect additional state funding will be required to render the MWMC viable.

Agency managers expressed some disquiet that counsellors should be paid per hour regardless of whether the meeting was attended by a lone client or a couple. That they should have the same type of pay-scale as information presenters was considered inappropriate. All agreed that there should be uniformity and a rationale across agencies in terms of counsellor payment for these meetings. The Lord Chancellor's Department agreed standard heads of expenditure and a budget with each local marriage counselling agency responsible for offering the MWMC, which included standard payment to the counsellors of £15 for delivering the MWMC to a single spouse and £22.50 for delivering it to a married couple. Payment for a supervision meeting was agreed at £45. In reality, however, individual agencies took decisions about the rates they paid during the pilots.

Chief executives and agency managers take the view that the MWMC should be available to anyone who wished to take up the offer, since the MWMC is, they believe, investing in the future through saving some marriages and promoting more conciliatory divorce. Agency managers firmly believe that inter-agency co-operation is clearly the preferred

---

<sup>3</sup> Dolton, P. and Horan, N., *An Analysis of the Cost of Information Meetings* (2000).

way forward for this new service and that this could be maintained through a Local Interdisciplinary Forum set up in each pilot area (which could also link in with other agencies within a local area).

### **A National Booking Service**

The Leicester and East Midlands information meeting pilot hosted the central booking service for the MWMC. This experiment enabled us to consider the pros and cons of a national central booking service (or regional booking service) for both the MWMC and information meetings in an implemented system. At the end of the pilots we interviewed administrative staff at Leicester, along with the pilot manager who managed the system.

#### *Administration*

The administrative staff who took the calls and arranged the meetings with marriage counsellors in the participating services were very positive about the central booking system. They saw it as helpful for people to be able to telephone a central number and have their appointment for a MWMC taken care of. It was a confidential service and neutrality was maintained. They felt that people phoning for an appointment had appreciated the quick response. On the negative side, the administrators experienced some difficulties in making appointments with the agencies, particularly with one of the agencies which worked a centralised booking system.

If a central booking service were to be used in an implemented system, a call centre with modern technology, including databases and computerisation, would need to be established. None of these facilities was available in the pilots. The call operators would need better training (none was provided in the pilots), including 'First Voice' training to help them respond appropriately to distressed callers. Many more counsellors and more agencies would need to participate on a nation-wide basis, thus minimising the difficulties experienced in the pilots when the only two counsellors trained to offer the MWMC in each area were not available. The administrative staff calculated that each call operator could process eight applications for a MWMC each hour, indicating that each request took on average some seven minutes to process from start to finish. This included collecting personal details from the applicant which were used primarily for research purposes in the pilots, but which would still be important for counsellors (and for ongoing evaluation of the service) in a implemented system. The administrative staff suggested that they should be paid on local government scales to reflect the responsibility of the job. They suggested it would be helpful to redesignate the MWMC as a 'meeting to examine your marriage', so that the expectations of applicants that they would be able to get counselling at the meeting would be dispelled.

#### *Managing a central booking system*

The manager of the MWMC central booking service also managed a busy information meeting pilot. She was committed to the concept of a central booking service and believed that under an implemented system a specific agency or organisation should be set up to manage the organisation and delivery of the MWMC. The call operators would, she maintained, need to be the kind of people generally employed as receptionists for the marriage agencies:

People who are approachable, who make people comfortable and at ease, someone who can communicate at a very simple level. It doesn't need a lot of fuss ... capable of meeting many very different sorts of people and being the same with each ... you want people who are respectful of the client ... it needs that personal touch – you are not ringing up NEXT to order an item from a catalogue.

These call operators could, in the view of the manager, be located regionally, although one national agency should be responsible for quality control of the entire information meeting and MWMC service. Those delivering meetings, of whatever kind, would need to be paid as professionals and not treated as volunteers. In this way, the counsellors could be required to take responsibility for dealing with legal aid eligibility as required in the Act.

The MWMC central booking service manager was convinced that people who wished to go on into counselling following the MWMC should be able to fast-track. Time is of the essence, and any delay could dissuade people from going into counselling. This would, of course, require all the marriage support agencies to adopt an agreed set of criteria. During the pilots, the agencies involved had different practices, which included some MWMC attendees having to go through a Relate intake interview before they could access counselling. This was not appreciated by the attendees.

In unison with the agency managers, counsellors and chief executives, the MWMC central booking service manager believed that the MWMC was an excellent intervention and that it should be nationally available. She wanted policymakers to

get on with it and get it done, and the sooner the better!

### **Conducting the Meeting with a Marriage Counsellor**

During our observations of the MWMC and in focus groups at the end of the pilots, we asked the counsellors and their supervisors to tell us about the experience of conducting this new solution-focused meeting. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive, even though the experience had been a new one and they had had some concerns.

#### *Making decisions and acknowledging emotions*

Counsellors reported that many attendees expected help with the decision-making process, perhaps because they were unsure of the way forward for their relationship. There was also a sense that they needed to try every available option before making the final decision. If parties attended as a couple, counsellors discerned that there was an increased likelihood of them wanting to explore the option of staying together, rather than the option of separation: in part, this may have been because they were not so far down the road to divorce as were attendees who attended alone.

According to the counsellors, some attendees arrived with more definite ideas about the future of their marriage. Some wanted to make the marriage work, and wanted to see if counselling could help in this process. Others were uncertain about ending the marriage, and wanted to use the meeting to focus on the relationship and reflect on whether the marriage was really over. People often arrived at the meetings displaying a range of

emotions. Many expressed feelings of hurt, vulnerability and distress over their current situation and what their partner was or was not doing. Others admitted to feeling vulnerable and, in many cases, to being at fault and regarding themselves as responsible for the relationship breakdown. Some people, both lone attendees and those who came to the meeting as a couple, also came feeling angry.

### *Understanding the purpose of the meeting*

Counsellors felt that some attendees did not understand the purpose of the MWMC. The invitation to attend and the literature which accompanied the letter confirming arrangements for the meeting did describe the content of the meeting and what one could expect from the meeting, but it should be remembered that many people were at a very emotional point in their lives and may have been focused on their immediate needs rather than on what the meeting could actually offer.

Counsellors told us that most commonly people came to the meeting expecting it to be a counselling session. During the introduction to the meeting, the counsellor made it clear that it was not going to be a counselling session. Some counsellors, however, felt that attendees were not able to differentiate between a MWMC and counselling. Counsellors felt that for many people the MWMC offered the opportunity to be heard and that being able to offload with a counsellor who is trained to listen was a very important part of the process. The meeting also offered the opportunity to apportion blame or to validate feelings towards a partner. This would seem to be an important dimension, particularly under an implemented system, which would adopt a no-fault divorce process. Previous research has shown that while rehearsing a catalogue of misdemeanours and complaints in a divorce petition does little to help parties end their marriages co-operatively and consensually, many people want and need to apportion blame. Unless there is some forum in which the hurts and wrongs of the past can be dealt with, it is likely that contentious pasts will be carried into future relationships and may never be resolved.<sup>4</sup> Neither the information meeting nor mediation provide this kind of forum, and it seems that the MWMC has the potential to do so.

Some people were clearly looking to the counsellor to answer questions. Attendees commonly requested specific information that was beyond the remit of the MWMC. Much of this information tended to centre on the desire for legal and/or financial information, especially if one partner was perceived to be at a disadvantage in relation to the other in connection with this. Counsellors appeared to be very happy to refer people to appropriate agencies on those occasions. Other attendees, especially those attending meetings at the Jewish Marriage Council and Marriage Care, appeared to seek affirmation for their decision (which was often to divorce), which might be contrary to their religious ethic. There were also those attendees who thought that the MWMC might solve everything. In other words, the meeting would serve the purpose of pointing them in the right direction, offering a quick fix or a plan which told them what they should do. Others hoped that the meeting would influence their partner decisively and were obviously looking for this kind of support. This was especially the case when a couple attended. The

---

<sup>4</sup> See Corlyon, J., Walker, J., Simpson, R., McCarthy, P., *The Links between Behaviour in Marriage, the Settlement of Ancillary Disputes, Arrangements for Children and Post-divorce Relationships*, Report to the Nuffield Foundation (1991); Walker, J., McCarthy, P. and Timms, N., *Mediation: The Making and Remaking of Co-operative Relationships: An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Comprehensive Mediation*, Relate Centre for Family Studies (1994).

person who initiated the meeting on those occasions was often looking for help to convince their spouse that divorce was the right option.

### *Motivation*

Counsellors felt that the fact that the MWMC was offered by personal invitation was sufficient to motivate many to attend the session. Some attendees obviously saw it as the next step after the information meeting and were curious to see if they could benefit from it. The fact that it was free and readily available also added to their motivation to attend. The MWMC was also seen by some as an alternative and perhaps more accessible route into counselling, and in some cases this legitimised their contacting a counselling agency. For those wanting to save their marriage time becomes a critical factor. The fact that an appointment for an MWMC was offered almost immediately was seen as a distinct benefit.

Counsellors agreed that the majority of attendees were emotionally motivated to attend the meeting. The meeting offered a place to release painful emotions surrounding lives which were falling apart. Others arrived at the meeting with feelings of failure, which they were able to talk through and perhaps reduce during the meeting. Many were motivated by the fact that they felt they had exhausted all other possibilities. These people saw the meeting as their 'last chance'. Some were motivated by the desire to be private and saw the MWMC as somewhere safe to go where they could keep their problems away from the family.

Trying to find a way forward was further motivation to attend. Many went in the hope of gaining help and advice on how to end their relationship and for confirmation that they were doing the right thing. A few were encouraged to attend by their solicitors, who advised their client that it would look good for them if they had attempted reconciliation. Counsellors also felt that some people who did not want to divorce were using the meeting to slow down the whole process in the hope of getting their partners to change their mind.

### *Using a solution-focused approach*

Counsellors identified the most positive aspect of using a solution-focused approach as being the opportunity to contain issues within the time given for the meeting. Useful as a 'taster', the MWMC served to move people on reasonably quickly, and this was considered to provide a valuable beginning for further work.

Although most counsellors were enthusiastic about the approach, they did highlight difficulties in using the solution-focused approach. In their view, if attendees are to gain full benefit from the MWMC they ought to be briefed fully about the aim of the meeting before attending. The solution-focused approach is supposed to provide options, but there were times when counsellors felt that this was not achieved, since there simply were no options available. Moreover, the approach does not seem to take account of unresolved issues in someone's past, and such attendees may have left the meeting feeling that the counsellor had not 'heard' them. Some counsellors commented that they were not sure if the solution-focused approach was appropriate for people who were in a very distressed state. Counsellors felt that the script seemed to structure the expectations of the attendees, but that it was unsuitable if the attendee had travelled quite a long way down the road to

divorce. Counsellors also highlighted what they felt were intra-session expectations: for example, the expectations of attendees that any further counselling would be free and the expectations of counsellors that most people would agree to further counselling.

Overall, the counsellors considered the solution-focused approach used in the MWMC to be far more appropriate for use with partners who attended the meeting together. This said, for it to work effectively the couple needed to want to move forward together. It was less useful if the partners had a split agenda, but nevertheless when used with couples it served the purpose of enabling them to focus on issues together. Many felt that some modification of the script is needed, since some of the questions used in the approach were not helpful. Overall, all the counsellors felt that the key questions included in the script were inappropriate for those people who attended alone. Counsellors agreed that there was a greater sense of completion in the work with couples. The couple tend to focus more on their relationship, and this is helpful since, as one counsellor expressed it, 'the couple dynamic is already in place'.

By contrast, individual attendees often had other motivations for attending the meeting:

Individuals want to talk, to unburden, etc. as they tend to engage more quickly with the counsellor and focus on their life experience. Counsellors may feel dumped with individual problems.

They believed, however, that the MWMC could be beneficial if the individual attendee were still in a relationship, but if they were not, the focus of the MWMC would have to change, although it might still be valuable for helping lone attendees in their future relationships.

Counsellors found that the focus of the MWMC also changed if the couple had children. There is an implicit expectation in the FLA that, if there are children, the parents should be encouraged to maintain an ongoing relationship as parents wherever this is possible, irrespective of whether they continue to live together or not. Some counsellors felt there had been occasions when attendees had used their children to legitimise their reasons for attending a MWMC.

When comparing delivering the MWMC with their everyday counselling work, counsellors told us that they had more control of the agenda in the MWMC than they do in counselling sessions. During the MWMC, the counsellors adopted a more active, almost business-like approach, which was less empathic than would normally be the case in counselling. While Relate counsellors felt that delivering the MWMC was akin to conducting an assessment interview for their agency, Marriage Care counsellors suggested that conducting the MWMC was not like anything they had previously done, but added that they had found it a very positive experience. Some counsellors expressed concern regarding the policy that if the attendee progressed into counselling, a different counsellor would be necessary. This left those delivering the MWMC feeling frustrated that they were unable to see a case through. We know that this was a problem for attendees as well.

### *Working with a script*

In delivering the MWMC the counsellors necessarily adopted a structured approach. Some of them felt somewhat restricted because they had to deliver to a script which made the meetings task-orientated rather than enabling them to take the usual psycho-dynamic

approach with which they were more familiar. Since the brief for the meeting was defined, and the meeting time was limited and the meeting designed as a 'one-off' session, there was no scope for exploring deeper issues (nor was there meant to be). Nevertheless, those counsellors who were familiar with the drop-in services offered by some of their agencies described the MWMC as very similar to this, in that time was limited and a need therefore existed to establish a relationship with the attendee very quickly. Relate counsellors likened the MWMC to their 'consultation with a counsellor' meeting and suggested that it required similar skills to those they used in their initial interview. As one counsellor suggested:

If you are doing initial assessments, the transition to this type of work is easier.

Despite their initial doubts about working with a script counsellors acknowledged the advantages of having a script for this type of meeting. It enabled them to maintain a distance between themselves and the attendee:

[The script] stops you straying into inappropriate counselling and keeps the focus on the issue. The script provides distance and makes it less difficult to get sucked into the issues.

[Using the script] prevents the curiosity of the counsellor.

The script not only enabled the counsellor to work within pre-set boundaries: it also helped to maintain the time-scale for the session, with a structured beginning, middle and end. Counsellors also suggested that the script was useful as a tool, a visual aid that the counsellor had in front of them that also served to help focus the attendee.

Although they saw the script as having benefits, however, some counsellors perceived disadvantages to working with a script. On the one hand, the script served as a useful tool to enable counsellors to contain the attendee, but, on the other hand, counsellors highlighted the lack of flexibility in using the script, especially when it seemed totally inappropriate in relation to the attendee's needs.

There were concerns, also, that the script was patronising and suggestions were made for alternative questions that could be incorporated into the script which might not be so dismissive of attendees, and might be more useful in moving them forward. Counsellors sought greater freedom to improvise with the ordering of the script and to add their own explanation of particular points. Agency managers suggested that a number of scripts should be developed to suit different situations. Relate managers felt that the Relate consultation interview could be developed to incorporate the MWMC approach.

### **The Role of Supervision**

At the beginning of the pilots for the MWMC the agencies were adamant that counsellors should be supervised in this work, which they saw as an extension of the delivery of counselling services. The Lord Chancellor's Department was not initially sympathetic to this view, but eventually accepted it, and a number of supervisors were selected and trained. Supervisors were dissatisfied with the training they had received. Although they took part in a one-day training programme they had no direct experience of the MWMC (unlike in agency supervision, where all supervisors have been counsellors at some point). They suggested that supervisors and counsellors should be trained together.

Supervision is normally offered on a one-to-one basis, with counsellor and supervisor discussing particular cases together. Both counsellors and supervisors suggested that this might be inappropriate and a waste of money for the MWMC in the pilots. As this was a one-off meeting and cases are not followed through, supervision was redefined as support for the counsellors. Counsellors felt that the supervision they received during the MWMC pilot was primarily concerned with maintenance of the service and quality assurance. Some felt that this was not enough, especially if they had to deal with clients in particularly difficult circumstances. There was much disparity between the counsellors about the issue of supervision. All acknowledged the need to be able to access some support, although the nature of this support sparked much debate. Some suggested that the option of telephone supervision could be explored. Others, however, were opposed to this notion, suggesting that it would not offer enough support and that the 'comfort zone' would be removed, leaving counsellors to deal with any unresolved issues on their own. In an implemented system the purpose and nature of professional supervision would need to be agreed, and supervisors would need to have a better understanding of the MWMC than they had in the pilots.

### **Delivering the MWMC in the Future**

There was overwhelming agreement on the part of counsellors and supervisors that trained counsellors were needed to deliver the MWMC, and numerous reasons and justifications for this were offered:

Counsellors trained to work with marriage issues and crises are able to 'hold' the split agenda of a couple.

Because of the large counselling element in the meeting, trained counsellors with their background and underpinning knowledge are needed to manage the emotional content, especially to be able to end the session well.

Trained counsellors are able to contain emotions, which understandably arise through couple dynamics, in order to keep the couple focused.

They need to be able to know how to respond to issues even if the issues are not to be explored.

Counsellors highlighted the fact that commitment to this structured model of work is important if the meeting is to be delivered effectively. They also acknowledged that other skills were essential, such as:

Containment, being able to engage quickly with clients, keeping sessions to time.

The ability to focus, stay in control and keep the balance between client expectations and the remit of the meeting.

Basic counselling skills were considered essential. These include reflecting, clarifying and paraphrasing, together with the ability to empathise and listen while being sharp, alert and able to think on one's feet. Experience in couple work was also considered essential. Since there are many other related issues which can cause difficulty in a marriage, counsellors who had skills in working in particular areas, such as gambling, alcohol abuse

and domestic violence, and with people from ethnic minorities, could be important resources.

Although the unanimous opinion of the counsellors was that trained counsellors were the most appropriate people to deliver the MWMC, they acknowledged that this type of work might not be suitable for all counsellors. Concerns were expressed that if counsellors have been trained to use a person-centred approach the transition from this to the solution-focused approach of the MWMC might be problematic. The general feeling was that counsellors did not necessarily have to be currently practising to offer the MWMC and that, in some cases, depending on the suitability of the counsellor they should be able to combine it with other counselling work.

### *Reflecting on training*

Overall, counsellors considered that their training had been good, and that it had prepared them for their role. They felt that multi-agency training was good practice to adopt, since it gave an insight, which they perhaps otherwise would not have had, into how other counselling agencies worked. They felt that they might have benefited from some supervised practice in the early stages.

Some disquiet was expressed about a lack of information and understanding regarding where the MWMC fitted into the context of the information meetings and the FLA. Both counsellors and supervisors felt they had been kept in the dark as regards information meetings, and made comments such as:

It would have helped to see an information meeting – we were told we couldn't see the CD-ROM.

[We would have liked] a demonstration of an information meeting or [to have been able to] observe an information meeting and know what goes on.

[We needed] to be able to ask questions about the Family Law Act and have more knowledge of the information pack and the invitation to attend a MWMC.

All counsellors were highly critical of the training they received from the Legal Aid Board in assessing eligibility for legal aid. The following comments reflect this negative feeling:

The legal aid training was not adequate – eligibility!?!?!???

This separate component of the training did not fit – we needed more training on completing the eligibility forms as there was much confusion over this in initial training.

Unfortunately, few eligibility forms were fully completed during the pilots, perhaps reflecting a lack of adequate training, and a lack of commitment among the counsellors and agency staff to the task of checking the forms and assessing eligibility. Four hundred and thirty-nine MWMC attendees (78%) brought their form to the meeting, but these were in various states of completion. Counsellors completed an eligibility assessment on forms from just 219 attendees. Of these, 83 (38%) were assessed by counsellors as eligible for legal aid, although the basis on which these assessments were made was not always clear.

There was universal agreement that assessing eligibility should not be the responsibility of counsellors. If they were to be required to undertake these assessments they would need more adequate training. A suggestion was made that if the MWMC is to be tied in to an information meeting process, the assessment for eligibility could be dealt with centrally at the point when an information meeting is requested. All the counsellors, agency managers and chief executives agreed with the principle of eligibility testing: people should pay if they are able to, but the process for making the assessments in the pilots was deemed highly unsatisfactory from all points of view.

Comments about improving the training process reflected the extremely short time-scale in which the MWMC service was set up. In common with those who trained to be information presenters, counsellors would have liked more time to familiarise themselves with the script and to have materials sent to them in advance so that they could have been more prepared when arriving for training. They would also have liked

[m]ore role play please – there was not enough time for feedback from these sessions.

More practice in how to manage the time available in meetings.

Both counsellors and supervisors welcomed the opportunity of having time to feed back, share and review the provision of the MWMC during the research focus days, and expressed a wish to see this offered as a regular forum for discussion in the future.

### *Devising a good meeting*

Counsellors were clear about the factors which made the MWMC a good experience for themselves and for attendees. In this respect, the attendance of both partners was considered a distinct advantage. Counsellors described a good meeting with a couple in a variety of ways:

They are both motivated to want to save their marriage.

The MWMC enables them to change their mind set. They come to the meeting convinced that their marriage is over, yet leave realising that perhaps it can be saved.

Those who manage to negotiate a way forward. They arrive at the meeting not knowing where to start but go away knowing how to proceed.

A couple who have a joint agenda when attending the meeting and who still have the same joint agenda when leaving.

By contrast, people who came to the meeting seeking specific advice or help about a particular problem sometimes left the counsellor feeling a sense of frustration, as the counsellor was not able to give the attendee what they wanted within the remit of the MWMC. Central to this, on the part of the counsellor, was the requirement to stick rigidly to the script, which was difficult if the attendee was determined to unburden him- or herself, as many were.

Some counsellors suggested that meetings tended to be unsatisfactory, both from their point of view and from that of the attendees, when the attendee was too far down the road

towards divorce. One or two counsellors also suggested that advice from an ‘unhelpful’ solicitor could also contribute to an unsatisfactory meeting, since it could lead to people engaging in

points scoring, when the solicitor indicates to his/her client that it would ‘look good’ if they attended a MWMC.

Counsellors and supervisors confirmed that there had been occasions when people who were already undergoing the process of relationship counselling attended a MWMC. The reasons for this are not known. It may be that the person misunderstood the purpose of the meeting, believing it to be something completely different from what it was. It may be that as the MWMC was offered free, people attended to see if there was anything to be gained over and above their normal counselling sessions. There was general agreement, however, that if people are currently engaged in marriage or relationship counselling there is little point in their attending a MWMC.

If, however, the client was in the process of personal counselling rather than relationship counselling, the situation was different. Counsellors and supervisors both agreed that it was entirely appropriate for someone in personal counselling to come to the MWMC with their partner:

[It] could be a useful way of bringing the partner in. There may be specific reasons for attending the MWMC and the solution-focused approach could be used to find out why.

The MWMC was set up in such a way that once an attendee had been to that meeting and had indicated their intention of progressing into counselling, they should not be allowed to have counselling with the same counsellor. Nevertheless, we know that this rule was breached on a few occasions, especially in the smaller agencies where resources were stretched. Counsellors felt it entirely appropriate that people should follow through into counselling with the same counsellor as they had for the MWMC, since this

cuts out the client’s need to go through their story again with someone new, a process that may be both upsetting and frustrating at a very difficult time.

They acknowledged that there may be occasions when using the same counsellor would be considered inappropriate. For example, if someone attended a MWMC as an individual, and then wanted to progress into counselling with their partner, the partner might feel somewhat disadvantaged since a relationship might already have been established between attendee and counsellor which could be seen as giving an ‘unfair advantage’ to that partner. Those agencies which require contributions from their clients (and not all do) for each session felt that they might also have difficulty deciding when to introduce the subject of contributions. As the MWMC was set up, progressing into counselling with a new counsellor enabled the subject of contributions to be discussed within the framework of opting in to the agency – thus the distance was deemed useful. We know from previous studies that the issue of contributions is one that causes counsellors a good deal of discomfort,<sup>5</sup> and going from the MWMC into counselling with the same counsellor might complicate an issue which already requires careful handling. What seems to be needed in the future is greater flexibility for attendees to decide

---

<sup>5</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).

whether or not they would prefer to stay with the same counsellor, and for counsellors to use their discretion as to what would be most appropriate in each case.

### *Maintaining standards*

When a service such as a MWMC is developed with the involvement of a number of different agencies, each with its own policies and practices, maintaining standards can be problematic. Both counsellors and supervisors suggested that, for quality standards to be maintained, there need to be agreed guidelines and complete multi-agency co-operation. Counsellors have a responsibility both to their agencies and to their clients to deliver what is required of them. This responsibility includes delivering the meeting within the required format, maintaining boundaries between counsellor and attendee, and containing attendees' emotions while enabling them to achieve clarity about their situation.

Both counsellors and supervisors highlighted the need for an agreed complaints procedure and a register of all counsellors and supervisors offering the service. Counsellors and supervisors suggested that, in order to monitor the content and quality of the service, there should be regular feedback sessions where counsellors, supervisors and the agencies involved might share and learn from each other's experiences. Monitoring should not be restricted to top-down practices. It was suggested that attendees need to be followed up in any future service so as to gain their views on the experience in order to evaluate the service as a whole.

The MWMC offered within the framework of the FLA would provide a new avenue via which people could engage with a counselling agency. A number of questions need to be asked here. Can the MWMC provide a framework for legitimising contact with a counselling agency? Does it widen the net and encompass a different population from those who would access counselling through the conventional route? Does it offer more than marriage saving, and should it do so?

The FLA is committed to saving saveable marriages. There is no doubt that the main focus of the MWMC was on facilitating clients to reflect on whether their marriage was really over, and therefore on encouraging them to enter into counselling with a view to saving it (which a few did). Can such a meeting really be expected to do this when it is tied into divorce legislation, and is offered to people at a time when they have gone some considerable way towards making a final decision? For many it may be an attempt which comes too late. On the other hand, if some people (e.g. 5%) are turned back from the brink of divorce, is this sufficient justification for offering the MWMC, which undoubtedly has benefits beyond marriage saving? We know that many clients progressed into counselling to gain an understanding of themselves, in other words for personal counselling. This might, in turn, enable them to save their marriages. It might also enable them to come to terms with the marriage ending in a more amicable way, or indeed help them to build better relationships in the future, but this was not the prime focus of the MWMC.

If information meeting and MWMC attendees found out anything new about counselling, it was that marriage counselling agencies are not only there for people who want to save their marriage. As we have seen, some people entered into counselling to help them to come to terms with the fact that their marriage had ended, or indeed to help them to split up amicably (thus perhaps helping them in subsequent relationships). Should the MWMC be used for this purpose, especially if it were to continue to be a state-funded service, or

should it be restricted to parties who will attend as a couple with the express intention of saving their marriage? Counsellors have suggested that the meeting, as it was offered during the pilots, was more suited to people who attended with their partner. If this is the case, the argument for restricted access would seem a strong one.

All those involved in delivering the MWMC were positive about its benefits and its potential to do far more than marriage saving. Counsellors, managers and chief executives were unanimous in wanting to send a clear message to government. In the words of one agency manager, 'The service works, so do it!' Certainly, in the pilots, the MWMC was able to move people on, to help them explore areas of certainty and uncertainty in their marriage, and to enable some to work on saving the marriage. Both Marriage Care and Relate have since introduced the solution-focused approach into their counselling training. Both these agencies are moving towards regionalised appointment systems, and have benefited from inter-agency co-operation in respect of training and service provision. In the pilot areas, marriage agencies have been able to develop more extensive inter-professional networks with other agencies working with separating and divorcing people.

The agencies involved viewed the experiment as a considerable success and seem keen to develop plans for the future which build on the work undertaken in the pilots. Irrespective of whether Part II of the FLA is implemented, the MWMC pilots have opened up considerable opportunities for new ways of working with people who might not otherwise approach a marriage counselling agency for help with a troubled relationship.

