Department for Work and Pensions

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Sole and joint birth registration: Exploring the circumstances, choices and motivations of unmarried parents

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A report of research carried out by the National Centre for Research and the Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Birmingham on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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### Abbreviations and acronyms

**Birth father**

This term is used to describe the father involved in the conception of a child. This is used in preference to other synonymous terms such as ‘biological father’.

**CB**

Child Benefit

**CMEC**

Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission. This is the proposed agency which, it is planned, will replace the Child Support Agency.

**CSA**

Child Support Agency

**CTC**

Child Tax Credit

**DPTC**

Disabled Person’s Tax Credit

**DWP**

Department for Work and Pensions

**GRO**

General Registry Office

**IS**

Income Support

**JSA**

Jobseeker’s Allowance

**ONS**

Office for National Statistics

**WFTC**

Working Families’ Tax Credit
Summary

Introduction

This is a report of a study concerning the choices, circumstances and motivations which influence and underpin sole and joint birth registration. It consisted of two key elements, the first of which sought to:

• investigate the characteristics of sole registrants compared to unmarried parents jointly registering;

• compare the characteristics of unmarried parents to those registering a birth within a marriage.

Quantitative analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) was used to fulfil these aims. This was conducted by Professor Stephen McKay at the University of Birmingham.

The second element was conducted by the Qualitative Research Unit at the National Centre for Social Research. It sought to explore and provide understanding about the motivations driving the different birth registration types amongst unmarried parents. In particular, this component of the study sought to:

• identify and examine, in depth, the motivations which drive the decision of unmarried parents to jointly or solely register the birth of their child;

• identify the barriers and facilitators to the joint registration of births for unmarried parents;

• explore the role played, or not played, by official advice and guidance in decisions about birth registration;

• map the characteristics and circumstances of unmarried parents making different choices about the registration of their child’s birth.

Depth interviews with 41 unmarried parents were used to deliver this element. Parents from two English cities were interviewed including sole registrants, joint registrants and both mothers and fathers. They were approached using a variety of routes, primarily using national birth registration records to approach parents.
who had recently registered a birth. Because it was anticipated that this might not provide parents from the fullest range of parenting circumstances and backgrounds, alternative sampling approaches were also used including approaches to gay and lesbian parenting groups.

Study findings

Quantitative analysis
The overwhelming impression that emerged from the quantitative analysis was that those sole registering births are typically lone parents (most cohabitants register jointly), facing high level of disadvantage (low qualifications, social tenancy, young age of mother). The low proportions receiving antenatal care, and having no-one else present at the birth of the child suggested some kind of exclusion or ‘isolation’. There were strong links to social housing tenancy, though the causal ordering of birth registration and housing tenure (i.e. which comes first) is unclear, and this is something that may be worth further investigation. Close to one in three of those sole registering the birth moved home in the year after the birth; around 40 per cent were aged 20 or younger.

There were some disappointing outcomes on important markers of health amongst sole registrants, including particularly high rates of smoking (approaching two in three) and low rates of attempting to breastfeed children. Such factors may be linked to non-attendance at any kind of antenatal care.

Some three years after the birth of the child, the natural father was only present in the household in one in six (17 per cent) cases where the birth had been sole-registered. And only about one in four of this group were in paid work. These figures were substantially less than for jointly registered births among cohabiting mothers, let alone for married mothers.

Qualitative research

Parental circumstances
The qualitative research provided three key findings about the circumstances of unmarried parents making different choices: First, the nature of the relationship and communication between birth parents influences the birth registration type. Relationship breakdown or failure of communication were commonly associated with sole registration. Second, the extent to which pregnancy was planned varied across joint and sole registrants. Third, the sole registrant population included lesbian mothers who had made choices which negated the possibility of joint registration with the birth father.

Experiences of birth registration
The main source of information parents received about birth registration was a leaflet included in a pack of information given to parents when the mother and
child were discharged from hospital. There was minimal discussion with hospital staff and where this did occur it focused on basic issues such as the time period within which infants should be registered.

There was a lack of clarity among parents over the practicalities of registering, such as whether an appointment is necessary, as well as over substantive issues. There was particular confusion around the issue of whether unmarried fathers have to be physically present at the registration in order to be included on the birth certificate. In part this confusion appears to stem from the fact that parents were told explicitly that fathers needed to be present by registrars’ offices and hospital staff.

Registration was seen as having multiple purposes, including practical ones such as enabling parents to claim child benefit or register the infant with a doctor. Registration also had important symbolic functions, such as affirming parental rights and responsibilities and as a marker of a child’s identity. As a result registration was seen as a significant event, and in some cases it was seen as equivalent to a christening or baptism.

Experiences of registration were affected by the physical and emotional state of the mother post-birth and the nature of the relationship between the co-parents. They were also affected by a number of other factors, the most significant of which was the attitude and behaviour of the registrar and particularly their ability to both personalise the experience and endow it with an appropriate level of formality.

**Choices and decisions about birth registration**

The extent to which choices and decisions are made can be mapped on a spectrum which includes four broad positions: choice and decision making negated; choice and decision making compromised; choice exercised but not experienced as a decision making process; and choice exercised and informed by the decision making process.

Parents’ immediate choices and decisions about birth registration options need to be understood in the context of the wider circumstances in which the birth of the child takes place. These include the circumstances of the pregnancy and the relationship between the parents before, during and after it.

Where the experiences of parents appear on the spectrum depends on a range of factors including the relationship between the parents, the timing of one parent’s non-cooperation with the other, understanding of the registration process and the nature of paternal involvement.

Even where parents do exercise choices about birth registration, they may do so without weighing up the pros and cons of both options. They may also make choices and decisions about other issues without understanding their relevance to birth registration options.
Making a fully informed and shared choice about which birth registration option to take is contingent on a combination of parental dialogue and co-operation and understanding of the registration process and its significance. In practice, however, either party could make independent choices or decisions that compromise or negate that possibility. And there may be others involved in the process with a direct or indirect interest in caring for the child.

Factors which motivated sole or joint birth registration

The factors that motivated choices and decision making fell into three categories: the child’s right in relation to their identity; parental rights and responsibilities; and the relationship between parents. Considerations about parental rights and responsibilities largely focused on paternal rights and responsibilities. A mother’s presence on a birth certificate is automatic, whereas the decision about birth registration is whether the father is also registered or not. These factors were underpinned by a range of specific considerations and influences and sometimes varied according to parenting circumstances.

All three categories were evident in both types of registration. Where fewer factors informed the birth registration type, there was an association between this and more limited understanding about the process and purposes of birth registration. The rights and identity of the child and paternal rights and responsibilities were seen as the most important factors by both types of registrants. For cohabiting joint registrants all three factors pointed strongly toward joint registration; there was no advantage to be had in sole registration.

Sole registrants (and joint registrants not cohabiting with the other parent) often experienced tension between these factors. This was particularly where the rights and identity of the child spoke for a joint registration, yet considerations around the rights and responsibilities of the father suggested sole registration. A range of strategies were evident in the way such tensions were dealt with. These included prioritising one particular factor or specific consideration, seeking to fulfil the child’s rights in ways other than the birth certificate or by using practical difficulties and assumptions about the father’s wishes to explain a sole registration.

Lesbian parents faced some specific issues: The involvement of three adults (the donor/birth father, birth mother and non-biological mother) meant that the various functions of the birth registration were perceived to be appropriate for one adult and unfair on another. There was particular frustration at the inability of the non-biological mother to be given the legal parental rights conferred by joint registration. The mismatch between the roles and responsibilities she played in the child’s life and the lack of legal recognition of this was experienced as discriminatory.
Conclusions

The role of official advice and guidance

The study points to the relative absence of official advice and guidance as a contributing factor to the informed choices of birth parents. Two factors appear to be particularly significant here: The first is the way in which official advice and guidance appears to be disseminated. In general it seemed to take place immediately after the birth, when birth parents, particularly mothers, were least able to absorb new information. Very few opportunities appear to have been taken to discuss the issues with birth parents prior to the registration appointment itself, by which time choices have effectively been made. The second significant factor is a consequential lack of understanding and awareness about birth registration.

Barriers and facilitators to joint registration

The study revealed a range of barriers and facilitators to joint registration. The quantitative analysis strongly suggested that social disadvantage is a barrier to joint registration. The qualitative evidence sheds further light on this and points to a variety of specific barriers. Unsurprisingly, these were commonly associated with the absence of the father at the point of registration. However, the circumstances which contributed to this absence varied from situations where his identity or whereabouts were unknown (in the case of identity this could be a deliberate choice), to situations which involved varying degrees of relationship and communication breakdown. These contributed to unresolved tensions about parental responsibility and the identity of the child. The other key barrier to joint registration was a lack of understanding or awareness of the process, function and significance of birth registration. This included misunderstandings about attendance at the event itself and the implications of options for financial and legal responsibilities.

Two key facilitators to joint registration emerged:

- effective communication between birth parents which enabled tensions about parental responsibility and the identity of the child to be discussed and resolved. The overarching factor appeared to be paternal involvement on terms appropriate and acceptable to the birth mother;

- information and advice about the process, function and significance of birth registration.

Sole registration could be an informed choice perceived to be in the best interests of the child. In the case of lesbian parents it could be the consequence of deliberate and considered choices about conception and parenting.
Legislative and non-legislative measures to promote joint registration

Respondents’ views about compulsory joint registration were shaped by respondents’ own experiences and speculation about the perceived experiences of others. Three broad views emerged which were not uniformly attached to either sole or joint registrants:

- it may be desirable because it would facilitate greater parental involvement and enable clarity about the child’s identity. However, a more sceptical view was that it could promote financial responsibility but not emotional involvement;
- it was simply not a practical option in certain circumstances, for example where the father’s identity or whereabouts were unknown;
- registration type should be the choice of parents, and in particular mothers, rather than imposed by government.

The study does point to the need for non-legislative measures to promote informed decision making. There is strong evidence that enhanced information, advice and support about birth registration will assist parents in making decisions which are in the best interest of the child. When this is best targeted and by whom, will vary considerably according to circumstances. It is clear that a one size fits all approach to intervention will not work.

Early intervention (even before pregnancy) will be important for some, but for others the period after the birth is a crucial period when discussions around parental involvement may take place. Providing better information, advice and support at different times and via various agencies could help to ensure that a range of choices and decisions made by parents about issues including financial and legal responsibility are informed by a greater understanding of the implications of birth registration options.

There are three key findings which suggest that a legislative approach may be problematic:

- For some mothers, sole registration is seen as being in the best interests of the child even where the fathers’ whereabouts are known. It may also be perceived as a means of actually promoting paternal involvement.
- Legislative measures will inevitably involve intervention after the birth. The experiences of participants in this research suggest that this may be too late to have the desired impact because choices and decisions, which have shaped parental responsibility, will have been made much earlier.
- In some instances a legislative approach, even as a last resort, would not be practical or appropriate and would often result in the need for exemptions.
Optimising informed choice about birth registration

This study shows that it is important to acknowledge that amongst sole registrants it cannot be assumed that unplanned pregnancy necessarily leads to a lack of paternal involvement or vice versa. Rather, parental roles are shaped in the context of possible separation and conflict and social disadvantage such as low qualifications or income. There are also other distinct groups amongst sole registrants, notably lesbian couples where pregnancy and parenting roles may be meticulously planned. Discussions about promoting the benefits of joint registration, therefore, need to be mindful of circumstances where this may be less appropriate for specific populations or situations.

The study demonstrates that the relationship between paternal involvement and joint registration is complex and varies in relation to circumstances. The dominant issue influencing which birth registration option is taken, is the level and nature of paternal involvement up to the point of registration. However, even where fathers had been involved with the mother during the pregnancy and after the birth, the outcome is not necessarily joint registration, because of mothers’ perceptions about the level and nature of that involvement.

The research does not provide evidence about whether joint registration facilitates greater and better paternal involvement, though the quantitative analysis does point to low levels of paternal involvement amongst sole registered births. But it does suggest that joint registration has other benefits, including enabling the child to know who both birth parents are and ensuring that this information can be accessed independently of birth parents.

Both sole and joint registrants were often clear that joint registration was the ‘ideal type’, through this was not the case for lesbian women. There was evidence that some sole registrant mothers would have liked joint registration if circumstances in relation to the father had been different.

Designing appropriate interventions

The evidence from this study suggests that promoting informed and shared choice about which birth registration option is best suited to their circumstances and to the interests of the child would be likely to facilitate increased joint registration and greater clarity about when it is neither practical nor desirable.

A key issue here is to recognise that the actions and choices of parents that ultimately facilitate joint registration often occur significantly earlier than the period immediately after the birth of a child. The ability to make an informed choice may in fact depend on actions and choices made before conception and, in part, to much wider life circumstances.

Registering a child’s birth is one specific point in a trajectory of decisions, choices and varying levels of parental involvement that begins at conception and continues after registration. This is driven by choices and decisions made previously and in some cases, by social disadvantage. For joint registration to be a real option, a
wide range of levers which influence paternal involvement along that trajectory need to be considered.

This trajectory can be used as a framework for exploring the choices that are made that affect, or could affect, which birth registration option is taken. This provides a means of identifying the opportunities for intervention that might underpin policy development in relation to birth registration.

The quantitative analysis also demonstrates the trajectory needs to be considered in the context of wider life circumstances, chances and opportunities. If the levers to influence birth registration choices are also seen as levers to bring about less disadvantaged parenting situations and improve paternal involvement, it is imperative that birth registration is seen in the widest possible context and not as an isolated event.

**The timing and nature of interventions**

As Table 1 illustrates, the trajectory consists of a series of key points at which various types of intervention by a range of agencies might be appropriate for parents. At different points interventions may take the form of information, advice, or counselling by one agency or several in combination. These interventions are not mutually exclusive and multiple interventions may be required for some parents depending on their circumstances. A considerable degree of multi-agency working will be required to ensure that informed choice is optimised by all parents.

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<td>From birth to registration</td>
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1 Introduction

1.1 Policy context

In December 2006 a White Paper, *A new system of child maintenance* raised registration of births as an important policy area for consideration. When a child is born to an unmarried mother, the birth certificate may only list the name of the father if he either attends the registration or submits a form declaring his paternity. In either method the father's presence on the birth certificate requires the mother's assent. If parents are married to each other both names appear automatically (and either parent can register the birth). At present around seven per cent of births are sole-registered, comprising 17 per cent of births among the unmarried (Smallwood, 2004 and birth statistics series FM1). Henshaw (2006) pointed out that around 20 per cent of those ‘currently eligible for child support’ are in the situation of only having the mother’s name on the birth certificate (paragraph 109). He suggested steps towards promoting and increasing joint registration of births, and noted that joint registration was made compulsory in Australia in the 1990s.

The White Paper proposed a move toward improving joint birth registration rates amongst unmarried parents, subject to further consultation. It was argued that:

‘Children have a right to know that their parents take responsibility for them. Many unmarried fathers do not get registered but nevertheless have a close relationship with their child’s mother.’

(DWP 2006: p 42)

Relatively little has been known about the seven per cent of mothers who register a birth solely in England and Wales. Such information is rarely collected in survey, and birth registrations themselves collect little information about mothers (and fathers, where appropriate). From a policy perspective, the Government’s strategic thinking is to produce a birth registration system that prioritises the welfare of

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1 The birth can, however, later be re-registered to include the (unmarried) father’s name. Also, if the couple marry they can they apply for the birth to be re-registered as a child of the marriage.
children in working from an assumption that, in normal circumstances, both parents will be involved in the upbringing of their child. The system produced needs to simultaneously safeguard vulnerable women and children. The need for more information underpins the current research.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned this research in order to better understand the profile of this group and the subjective motivations involved in determining the registration type. This information, in turn, should help the Government in producing an effective birth registrations process. The Qualitative Research Unit (QRU) at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and Stephen McKay from the Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Birmingham, were commissioned to undertake this research.

In June 2007 a Green Paper was published entitled ‘Joint birth registration: promoting parental responsibility’ (DWP, 2007) proposing legislative and non-legislative measures to promote joint birth registration. At the time of writing, a consultation period of 13 weeks was underway and due to end on 25 September 2007.

1.2 Research aims and purposes

Given the relative paucity of information about sole registrants as a group, one key purpose was to investigate the characteristics of parents making different types of registration. Specific aims were to:

- investigate the characteristics of sole registrants compared to unmarried parents jointly registering;
- compare the characteristics of unmarried parents to those registering a birth within a marriage.

Quantitative analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) was used to fulfil these aims. The findings from this investigation, conducted by Professor Steve McKay at the University of Birmingham, are presented in the following section.

A second set of aims was to explore and provide understanding about the subjective motivations driving the different birth registration types amongst unmarried parents:

- identify and examine, in depth, the motivations which drive the decision of unmarried parents to jointly or solely register the birth of their child;
- identify the barriers and facilitators to the joint registration of births for unmarried parents;
- explore the role played, or not played, by official advice and guidance in decisions about birth registration;
- map the characteristics and circumstances of unmarried parents making different choices about the registration of their child’s birth.
Qualitative research using in-depth interviews with unmarried parents was used to deliver these aims. This was conducted by the QRU at the NatCen.

1.3 Comparing the characteristics of sole and joint birth registrants: quantitative analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study (2001/02)

This section examines the characteristics of unmarried mothers who do, and do not, include the father’s name on the birth certificate. Both groups are also compared with married mothers, where the father is automatically included (and is able to register the birth himself). Particular attention is paid to the seven per cent of births which were sole registered. The range of factors investigated is relatively wide, covering the characteristics of the mother, details surrounding pregnancy and the birth of the child and information on the father where data permits.

The work is based on new analysis of data from the first wave of the MCS, a survey of around 18,500 births during 2001/02. During the interviews mothers were asked for their marital status and, where unmarried, whether the father’s name was included on the birth certificate. The extensive interview went on to collect various details of parenting, child development and so on. This took place when the babies were eight to nine months old, with some retrospective questions about the birth, pregnancy and so on. A follow-up interview took place three years later, and there have been subsequent interviews (though only data from the first two waves is available at the time of writing, summer 2007). It should be clear that this chapter stands apart from the rest of the report. Most of the report is based on qualitative analysis and intensive scrutiny of detailed interviews with a relatively small number of people. The small sample size and purposive methods of sampling provide insights into the birth registration process but are not amenable to statistical analysis. In this chapter we have a large sample, drawn using probability methods, that is suitable for statistical analysis – in particular comparing those sole registering a birth with other groups.

1.3.1 Existing research

Some studies have looked at some of the characteristics of mothers in the UK registering a birth on their own (Smallwood 2004, Kiernan 2005). Generally speaking, they have been based on data from birth certificates or have been incidentally covered as part of another kind of investigation (such as into cohabitation).

Further technical details are available in: University of London Institute of Education Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2003) and Smith and Joshi (2002).
Smallwood (2004) noted that the proportion of sole registrations had remained fairly stable in the 20 years preceding. He also found that those mothers with a sole registration started their childbearing earlier than other mothers – about four years earlier, on average. His work showed that ‘These women also had larger families and were more likely to come from a lower social class background.’ (Smallwood, 2004: 20).

Kiernan (2005) examined the involvement of non-resident fathers with children, and uses being named on the birth certificate as a measure of the father’s involvement with and closeness to the mother and child. She found that a higher proportion of non-resident fathers were named on the birth certificate (63 per cent) than were present at the birth of the child (45 per cent).

In Michigan (USA), Puder et al. (2003) identified a number of different factors associated with lower rates of ‘paternity establishment’ in hospitals (among the unmarried). A number of quite clear-cut results were found, which it is interesting to compare with the experience in the UK as there are clear parallels:

‘Paternity establishment rates were lower in women who were African-American, had late or no prenatal care, were under 20 years old, had less than high school education, delivered infants who were less than 2,500g, were abnormal, or were premature.’

(p. 260)

1.3.2 Background to UK birth registrations

Around seven per cent of births in England and Wales are sole registered. Since married couples jointly register births automatically the proportion of sole registrations depends on:

• the proportion of births outside marriage; and
• the proportions of such births that are not jointly registered.

Since around 1970, the proportion of births outside marriage has been on an upward trend, but so has the proportion of non-marital births that are jointly registered (see Figure 1.1). This strongly suggests that many of those born to unmarried parents are born to those in cohabiting (‘marriage-like’) relationships. In 2003, for England and Wales, the 41 per cent of births outside marriage may be broken down into:

3 The system in the USA is somewhat different than for the UK. Unmarried fathers must complete a voluntary declaration of paternity in order for the child to have a ‘legal father’, and typically to enable them to appear on the child’s birth certificate. Forms must also be completed by mothers. Increasing the number of such declarations made has become an important part of US child support policy.

4 The data sources for this section are datasets PBH37 and PBH22B from the National Statistics website. These cover sole registration and births outside marriage.
• 26 per cent to unmarried couples living at the same address;
• eight per cent joint-registered, parents living at separate addresses; and
• seven per cent sole-registered (Smallwood 2004: p25).

**Figure 1.1 Joint registrations and non-marital births (percentages for both axes), 1964-2004**

These trends mean that the proportion of sole registrations has fluctuated over time but within a relatively narrow band since the mid-1980s (see Figure 1.2). It is worth noting that the proportions of sole-registered births, and of unmarried births, did not change much during the 1960s and early 1970s. After 1975, however, there were strong upward trends in both.

Sole registrations reached a high of close to eight per cent in 1998, but have been gradually declining since then, and are now around seven per cent and they appear to be on a slow downward trend. This means that joint registration is increasing among unmarried parents, although the proportion of births to unmarried parents continues to rise (a trend recognised for some time – see Ruddock, Wood and Quinn 1998).
Figure 1.2  Sole registrations and non-marital births, 1964-2004

1.3.3  Characteristics of mothers with sole-registered births

Relatively little has been previously known about the characteristics of people who register solely or jointly. This section examines evidence from the first wave of the MCS. Information is available from interviews taking place with parents when children were nine months old. Data includes information relating to the time of the birth (such as whether the father’s name was on the birth certificate). This was true of seven per cent of respondents, reassuringly in line with national figures from birth registration statistics. Among the sample members, there were 1,409 respondents where births were sole-registered (this is the actual or ‘unweighted’ number of respondents) on which this research is based.

In this substantive section we look at the characteristics of mothers who sole-registered their birth. These are compared with information concerning those jointly registering the birth and with married mothers. A range of different kinds of information is considered, from educational qualifications to antenatal care, to health behaviour such as smoking. This section concludes by tracking the circumstances of mothers when their child reaches the age of three (the second sweep of the MCS).
The mother’s circumstances

Overall, within the MCS:

• 41 per cent of births were outside of marriage;

• 84 per cent of unmarried mothers jointly registered their birth; so

• seven per cent of all births were sole-registered.\(^5\)

A total of 1,409 mothers within the MCS had sole registered births, being unmarried and not completing a birth certificate with the father present. Sole registrations were slightly more common in Wales (nine per cent) than the rest of the UK (see Figure 1.1) This mostly results from having fewer births to married mothers in Wales (55 per cent) than elsewhere (59 per cent for the UK as a whole).

While mothers were more likely to be married in Northern Ireland (66 per cent) than in the UK as a whole (59 per cent), among unmarried mothers joint registration was actually less common (75 per cent) than for the UK (84 per cent). The other regional difference of note (not shown here) was a higher rate of sole registration in the North West of England (10 per cent).

### Table 1.1  Birth registration by country of residence at wave 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth certificate status</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Wales</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Northern Ireland</th>
<th>UK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried, jointly registered</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole-registered</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unweighted number of sole-registrations</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>1,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weighted base</strong></td>
<td>15,118</td>
<td>945</td>
<td>1,732</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>18,494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unweighted base</strong></td>
<td>11,485</td>
<td>2,751</td>
<td>2,327</td>
<td>1,917</td>
<td>18,480</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weighted by ovwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis)\(^6\).

Base is natural mothers of the cohort members.

---

\(^5\) Broadly, the result is: proportion unmarried \* proportion not joint-registering, or 41\% \* (100\% - 84\%) = 7\%.

\(^6\) Note: The weighted and unweighted bases shown indicate that respondents in England were under-sampled, and over-sampled in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This means that more precise figures may be given for the smaller countries – with little effect on the accuracy of the figure for England.
Marital status

As would be expected, sole registrations were most common among those who were single, and who had never been married – at 18 per cent of their births. There were also relatively high rates among the divorced (11 per cent) and the separated (nine per cent).

Table 1.2  Birth registration by marital status at wave 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration status</th>
<th>Legally separated</th>
<th>First marriage</th>
<th>Other marriage</th>
<th>Single, never married</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>[17]</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried, jointly registered</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>[54]</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole-registered</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>[28]</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weighted base  448  10,423  831  5,928  825  35  18,494
Unweighted base 522  10,254  753  6,183  733  33  18,480

Notes: Weighted by ovwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis). Base is natural mothers of the cohort members. Percentages in [ ] are based on fewer than 50 cases and so are unreliable. ‘*’ indicates less than 0.5% but more than zero.

We may also ‘turn around’ these figures to show the proportions of sole registrants with different kinds of marital status (at the time of the first interview) and also their actual (rather than legal/marital) status at the time of the birth. Information on formal marital status is less helpful – close to nine in ten sole registrants (86 per cent) are ‘single, never-married’, with almost one in ten (eight per cent) divorced at time of interview – see Figure 1.4. More interesting are results for actual living arrangements – measured in MCS at the time of birth (see Figure 1.3). Only a little over half (51 per cent) said they were not in any kind of relationship at the time of birth. A sizeable group (22 per cent) agreed they were ‘closely involved’, whilst 14 per cent were ‘just friends’ with the baby’s father. Only 11 per cent were cohabiting (living together as if married).
Figure 1.3  Relationship status of sole registrants, at birth

Notes: Weighted by owwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis). Base is natural mothers of the cohort members. Age of birth mother at birth.
Figure 1.4 Marital status nine months later

Sole-registered births were much more common among younger mothers (see Figure 1.5). At the time of the birth of the cohort member (the baby born in 2000/02) on average:

- married mothers were 30.7 years;
- unmarried mothers, with the father named on the birth certificate, were aged 26.5;
- unmarried mothers, solely registering the birth, were aged 23.8.

The median ages are quite stark. Married mothers had a median age of 31, jointly-registering unmarried mothers were aged 26, and sole registrants were aged 22.
This and the next chart (Figure 1.6) confirm a picture of sole registrants typically being at the younger end of motherhood. Below the age of 25, joint-registered unmarried births are the most common category, with conversely marriage representing over 70 per cent of births to mothers over 30. Sole registration is particularly common for those giving birth under the age of 21 – and the younger the mother, the more common that the birth is sole-registered. Even so, among unmarried mothers of all ages joint registrations strongly outnumber sole registrations.
Figure 1.6  Distribution of birth registrations, by age of mother at time of birth

This linechart shows the proportion of mothers with different kinds of birth registration for each age of mother. The lines sum to 100 per cent vertically, for each age/year.

To express the data in terms of younger mothers, 39 per of sole registrants were aged 20 or younger, compared with just two per cent of married mothers and 20 per cent of joint registrants, who were unmarried.

Qualifications and skills
Mothers with higher level qualifications were least likely to be sole registrants. Some 16 per cent of mothers with no qualifications had sole registered the birth, compared to 11 per cent of those with NVQ level one, seven per cent of those with NVQ level two (GCSE level), six per cent for level three (A level), and just two per cent for those with at least NVQ level four (such as degree-level).

More direct measures of skill were also correlated with sole registrations. Some 17 per cent of those who said they had difficulty reading forms had sole registered their birth.
Ethnic group

Sole registration was most common for those who described themselves as being of mixed ethnic group (14 per cent), ‘black or black British’ (12 per cent) and white (seven per cent). Over 90 per cent of those from an Indian or Pakistani or Bangladeshi background were married at the time, compared with 38 per cent of those who were ‘black or black British’ – see Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Birth registration by banded ethnic group of the child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration status</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Indian</th>
<th>Pakistani and Bangladeshi</th>
<th>Black or Black British</th>
<th>Other ethnic group</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried, jointly registered</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole-registered</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weighted base 16,070
Unweighted base 15,247

Notes: Weighted by ovwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis). Base is natural mothers of the cohort members. Percentages in [ ] are based on fewer than 50 cases and so are unreliable. ‘*’ indicates less than 0.5% but more than zero.

Among those who sole registered the birth, 87 per cent were white, seven per cent ‘mixed’ and five per cent ‘black or black British’.

Housing tenure

There was a strong connection between sole registrations and particular types of housing tenure. As we show in Figure 1.7, among those living with their parents one in four (25 per cent) had a sole registration. Though, interestingly, close to half this group (47 per cent) still had a joint registration of the birth. Marriage and owner occupation were very strongly linked. Sole registrations were more typical of local authority tenants (17 per cent registering the mother’s name only) and tenants of housing associations (15 per cent).

It is also important to note that many mothers move at the time of the birth, and so their tenure at the first interview may not be reflecting their circumstances during pregnancy. In fact, 31 per cent of those who had sole registered the birth had moved within the past year, compared with 11 per cent of married mothers and 25 per cent of joint registrations (Figure 1.8). Conversely, 14 per cent of sole registrants had lived at their current address for over ten years – a pattern associated with many of them still living with their own parents.
Figure 1.7  Distribution of birth registrations, by tenure of mother nine months after birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenure of Mother</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Unmarried - joint</th>
<th>Unmarried - sole</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living with parents</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent from local authority</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent from housing association</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent privately</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part rent/part mortgage (shared equity)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live rent free</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own outright</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own - mortgage/loan</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.8  Time at current address, by type of birth registration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (years) at current address</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Unmarried - joint registration</th>
<th>Unmarried - sole registration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under a year</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Housing tenure is a good marker of disadvantage and affluence. So there are also strong correlations between sole registered births and low income and benefit receipt. The rate of sole registrations was just over 20 per cent where the household income was less than £10,400 per annum and 16 per cent for recipients of income-related benefits (Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA), Income Support (IS), Working Families’ Tax Credit (WFTC) and/or Disabled Person’s Tax Credit (DPTC)).

**Pregnancy, birth and parenting**

In this section we look at circumstances surrounding the pregnancy and the birth.

**Pregnancy**

As might be expected, there was a strong link between the circumstances of the pregnancy and the rate of sole registration. Where the mother had been planning to get pregnant, only one per cent led to a sole registration, compared with 14 per cent where the pregnancy had been described as a surprise. The feelings that the women had when pregnant were also associated with whether the father later appeared on the birth certificate. Where the mother was ‘very happy’ to be pregnant, only two per cent did not include the father’s name on the birth certificate, compared with 25 per cent of those who said they were ‘very unhappy’, and 19 per cent who said they were ‘unhappy’ (and 17 per cent who said that they weren’t bothered either way).

**Antenatal care and health**

Among those who had not received any antenatal care, some 18 per cent of mothers had registered the birth without the father being named. This was three times as high as for mothers who had received some antenatal care. This absence may have affected later parenting practices, which were also correlated with birth registration. Under half (47 per cent) of mothers with a sole registration had ever tried to breastfeed their child, compared with 79 per cent of married mothers and 61 per cent of those jointly registering among unmarried mothers.

There are other health areas we may investigate. Among those sole registering a birth, 63 per cent say they are smokers, compared with 45 per cent of unmarried jointly registering and just 16 per cent of married mothers.

**The birth**

One successful means of increasing paternity establishment in the USA has been to increase paternity declarations made in hospitals, at around the time of the birth (see Pirog and Ziol-Guest, 2006). It is worth noting that this was from a base of only having about 30 per cent of unmarried mothers naming a father in the mid-1980s, a figure which is now around 80 per cent (i.e. still lower than in the UK). However, for the UK in only two per cent of cases was the father present at the birth and did not then appear on the birth certificate (Table 1.4). Sole registration was most common where some other person had attended the birth (a friend or relative) and the father had not.
Table 1.4 Birth registration by who else was present at the birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration status</th>
<th>No-one else</th>
<th>Baby's father</th>
<th>Friend</th>
<th>Mother (in-law)</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried, jointly registered</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole-registered</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weighted base: 813 1,873 620 2,981 1,310 18,494
Unweighted base: 979 15,333 700 3,182 1,514 18,480

Notes: Weighted by ovwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis). Base is natural mothers of the cohort members. Note: more than one person may have been present at the birth.

Birthweights may be grouped according to World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines\(^7\). Weights under 1,500g are regarded as ‘very low birthweight’ and those under 2,500g as ‘low birthweight’. Sole registered births were slightly more likely than average to be underweight, but the differences were relatively small (see Table 1.5). The link between sole registration and low birth weight, though statistically significant, is weaker than some of the other associations reported on (and the links have been found to be stronger in American research).

Table 1.5 Low birth weights, by birth certificate details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration status</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Unmarried, jointly registered</th>
<th>Unmarried, sole registered</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very low birthweight (under 1,500g)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low birthweight (under 2,500g)</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weighted base: 10,924 6,336 1,214 18,474
Unweighted base: 10,613 6,439 1,409 18,461

Notes: Weighted by ovwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis). Base is natural mothers of the cohort members.

The father

Relatively little information is available on a consistent basis about fathers, since they range from married partners of respondents (often interviewed directly) to men about whom the mothers knew very little. As might be expected, there were strong links between a sole-registered birth and little (or no) contact with the father. Where the father was absent and not paying maintenance, in some 48 per

---

\(^7\) See Kramer 1987 and http://www.who.int/healthinfo/statistics/indlowbirthweight/en/
cent there had been a sole-registered birth. Similarly, where the father was non-
resident and the mother was not (or no longer) in contact with him, some 67 per
cent of such births were sole-registered.

**Relationships at the time of the birth**

Just over half (51 per cent) of sole registrants said they were not in a relationship
at the time of the birth (see Figure 1.3). Even so, some 27 per cent of those not in
a relationship did in fact register a birth jointly (see Table 1.6) This was much lower
than for those describing themselves as being ‘just friends’ (64 per cent jointly
registered). As we might expect, the closer and more enduring the link between
the parents, the higher the proportion who jointly register the birth.

The average age at birth differed both by relationship status at birth, and whether
the birth was jointly registered. Married respondents were, on average, the oldest
at the time of birth (31 years), compared with 27 years for cohabitants, and around
23 years for those who were just friends, closely involved or not in a relationship.
Even within these groups, the sole registrants were, on average, about two years
younger than those registering the birth together with the father.

Compared with other mothers interviewed for the MCS, those not in a relationship
at the time of birth were:

- more likely to be living in an urban area (84 per cent, compared with 75 per
cent overall);
- much more likely to be living in a disadvantaged area (56 per cent: 35 per cent).
  [That is, in areas found to be in the worst quarter of wards using the ward-
based Child Poverty index in 1998.];
- only ten per cent said they planned to get pregnant, compared to 57 per cent
  overall – although over half (54 per cent) were ‘happy’ to be pregnant (but
  compared to 85 per cent overall);
- only 11 per cent were alone at the birth (four per cent overall);
- only 47 per cent tried to breastfeed (71 per cent overall);
- in 27 per cent of cases they were still in contact with the father, and in four per
  cent of cases he was now resident;
- some eight per cent were living with a partner seven-ten months later (86 per
  cent overall);
- about half as likely to be in paid work when interviewed (24 per cent: 50 per
  cent);
- rather more likely to have no qualifications (30 per cent, compared with 13 per
  cent overall);
- had the same proportion describing themselves as ‘white’, as the sample of
  mothers as a whole (87 per cent);
- 28 per cent gave birth as teenagers, compared with seven per cent overall.
Table 1.6  Birth registration by relationship status at birth of cohort child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration status</th>
<th>Married and living together</th>
<th>Cohab/living as married</th>
<th>Separated</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Closely involved</th>
<th>Just friends</th>
<th>Not in any relationship</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried, jointly registered</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>[75]</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole-registered</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>[25]</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weighted base 10,919 4,656 183 [16] 1,371 474 842 18,461
Unweighted base 10,603 4,361 244 [16] 1,718 546 954 18,442

Notes: Weighted by owwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis). Base is natural mothers of the cohort members. Percentages in [ ] are based on fewer than 50 cases and so are unreliable. '-' indicates zero cases.

Table 1.7  Average (median) age at birth by registration and relationship status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration status</th>
<th>Married and living together</th>
<th>Cohab/living as married</th>
<th>Separated</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Closely involved</th>
<th>Just friends</th>
<th>Not in any relationship</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried, jointly reg’d</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole-registered</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>[29]</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 31 27 28 23 23 23 29

Notes: Weighted by owwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis). Base is natural mothers of the cohort members. Figures in [ ] are based on fewer than 50 cases and so are unreliable. '-' indicates zero cases.
1.4 Statistical modelling of sole registered births

Logistic regression may be used to consider a number of characteristics operating all at once on the chances of a mother having a sole-registered birth. Some initial analysis conducted the independent importance of: housing tenure, age at birth, ethnic group and qualifications. The gender of the baby wasn’t important. Being the first born (or, at least, having no siblings in the household) was also weakly associated with having a sole registration, independently of other factors.

This analysis can be taken further, and more kinds of information included. However, further investigation is needed to consider how to capture the strong effect of housing tenure, and whether (nine months after the birth) this is more properly seen as an effect rather than as a cause of the way the birth was registered and the circumstances of the mother.

1.5 Changes three years on

An important next step is to chart how families change over time, how circumstances alter, personal relationships develop, and how far this is associated with information about marital status and birth registration.

By the time of the second wave of the MCS, when the selected child was about three years old, in 83 per cent of cases the natural father was resident in the household (see Table 1.8). Where the parents were married at the time of birth, in as many as 95 per cent of cases the natural father was still present in the household. This compared with 72 per cent of fathers being resident if a cohabiting couple had jointly registered the birth but only 17 per cent of fathers in the household where the birth had been solely registered. This is, clearly, a very large difference in the proportions of fathers being resident in the household three years after the birth of their children.

Table 1.8 Status of natural father, three years after birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration status</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Unmarried, jointly registered</th>
<th>Unmarried, sole registered</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural father resident in household</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural father not in household</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighted base</td>
<td>9,374</td>
<td>4,901</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>15,155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unweighted base</td>
<td>8,860</td>
<td>4,909</td>
<td>1,010</td>
<td>14,779</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Weighted by ovwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis). Base is natural mothers of the cohort members.
By way of comparison, Haskey (1999) found that 17 per cent of sole registrants were *married* in the period from 1996/98. This is a similar time-span to that, above. In Haskey’s research the nature of the data meant it wasn’t always clear if the (new) spouse was also the father.

There was also an association between how the birth was registered and the subsequent employment status of the mother (the main respondent). Just over half (55 per cent) of the mothers in the study were working when the cohort baby was about three years old (see Table 1.9). These varied from 59 per cent of the married mothers, to an even half of those cohabitants who had jointly registered the birth, to as low as one-quarter (27 per cent) of those who had registered the birth in their own name only.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration status</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Unmarried, jointly registered</th>
<th>Unmarried, sole registered</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In paid work</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in paid work</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighted base</td>
<td>9,306</td>
<td>4,865</td>
<td>872</td>
<td>15,043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unweighted base</td>
<td>8,785</td>
<td>4,872</td>
<td>1,002</td>
<td>14,659</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Weighted by ovwt2 (non-response weight for whole UK analysis). Base is natural mothers of the cohort members.

### 1.5.1 Discussion

In this section we briefly draw together some of the main threads of the analysis.

The overwhelming impression that emerges from the analysis is that those sole registering births are typically lone parents (most cohabitants register jointly), facing high level of disadvantage (low qualifications, social tenancy, young age of mother). Perhaps of particular concern is the low proportions receiving antenatal care and having no-one else present at the birth of the child – suggesting some kind of exclusion or ‘isolation’. There are strong links to social tenancy, though the causal ordering of birth registration and housing tenure (i.e. which comes first) is unclear and this is something that may be worth further investigation. Close to one in three of those sole registering the birth moved home in the year after the birth; around 40 per cent were aged 20 or younger.

There are some concerning outcomes on important markers of health among those with sole registrations – including particularly high rates of smoking (approaching two in three) and low rates of attempting to breastfeed children. Such factors may be linked to non-attendance at any kind of antenatal care (in either causal direction).
Some three years after the birth of the child, in only one case in six (17 per cent) was the natural father now present in the household – where the birth had been sole-registered. And only about one in four of this group were in paid work. These figures are substantially less than for jointly registered births among cohabiting mothers, let alone for married mothers.
2 Research methods and sample profile

The previous chapter explained the policy context, purposes and aims of the research. It also examined the profile of sole registrant mothers compared to jointly-registered unmarried mothers and those registering a birth within marriage.

The chapter begins with a note to the reader about the report. It explains how the report is structured, the way in which findings are presented and makes clear how and when direct quotations and case examples are used.

This chapter then sets out the study design, research methods employed in the quantitative and qualitative elements of this work. It goes on to profile the sample of parents participating in the qualitative study. It looks at the circumstances and parenting roles taken by both parents.

2.1 Structure of the report

Chapter 1 examined and explained the policy context within which this research was commissioned, the purposes and aims of the research and the profile of sole and joint registered mothers (as analysed using the Millenium Cohort Study (MCS) data). Chapter 2 outlined the research design, methods used and profiles the sample of parents who took part in the research. Chapter 3 looks at parents’ awareness, understanding and experiences of birth registration. This is an important contextual backdrop to decision making and the factors involved. Chapter 4 examines the extent to which decision making was experienced as a choice. It looks at how parents’ perception or ability to make decisions about the birth registration type were constrained. Chapter 5 turns to the factors involved in decision making. It looks at the parents’ motivations, what they consisted of in detail and how different motivating factors interacted with one another. It examines which parent took what role in different registration types and when decisions about registration were made. It considers the role of official guidance. Chapter 6 is a discussion of the key findings, set in the context of key current policy issues.
Verbatim quotations and case studies are used to illustrate the findings. They are labelled to show registration type, gender, age group and ethnicity. Quotes and case studies are drawn from across the sample. Data from 22 individuals were used for these and no one person is used more than twice.

The report deliberately avoids giving numerical findings, since qualitative research cannot support numerical analysis. This is because purposive sampling seeks to achieve range and diversity among sample members rather than to build a statistically representative sample, and because the questioning methods used are designed to explore issues in depth within individual contexts rather than to generate data that can be analysed numerically. What qualitative research does do is to provide in-depth insight into the range of phenomena, their social context and the associations between issues.

2.2 Study design and conduct

Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to conduct this research amongst unmarried parents. The quantitative analysis was carried out before the qualitative sampling stage of the study and the qualitative work used findings from the quantitative sample in planning the sample and designing the topic guide.

The quantitative element presents new analysis of data from the first wave of the MCS, a survey of around 18,500 births during 2001/02. During the interviews mothers were asked for their marital status and, where unmarried, whether the father’s name was included on the birth certificate. The extensive interview went on to collect various details of parenting, child development and so on. This took place when the babies were eight to nine months old, with some retrospective questions about the birth, pregnancy and so on. A follow-up interview took place three years later, and there have been subsequent interviews (though only data from the first two waves is available at the time of writing, summer 2007).

The qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with 41 parents who were parenting in a wide range of circumstances. Parents from two cities were interviewed, including sole registrants, joint registrants and both mothers and fathers.

The study used qualitative research methods because of their ability to explore and explain issues in depth, from the perspective of the participant group. As a relatively under-researched issue, qualitative methods were particularly appropriate for their ability to map and explain issues relating to birth registrations within the social context of participants’ lives. Given the paucity of research literature within the area of birth registration decision making and implications, this is generally

Further technical details are available in: University of London Institute of Education Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2003) and Smith and Joshi (2002).
an area that would benefit from further research. Further research could provide timely information in debates considering changes to the current birth registrations system. Recommendations of potentially useful future research directions are discussed in Appendix A.

2.2.1 Approaching parents to participate in the study

Parents were approached using a variety of routes. The main approach was using national birth registration records to approach parents who had recently registered a birth. Supplementary sampling was carried out to boost particular sample elements using a range of ‘free find’ options.

Opt in via the National Birth Registration Records

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) made this initial approach – the General Register Office (GRO) is a part of ONS and ONS are responsible for data and information on births, marriages and deaths. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the research subject (in that it necessarily involves discussing what are sometimes problematic periods or difficult relationships between parents), and the normally private nature of the GRO data, an opt-in approach was used. This approach usually results in a lower response rate than an opt-out and introduces potential concerns about possible built-in biases in the research sample. However, ethical issues were of paramount importance in the study’s design and so the opt-in approach was used regardless of potential drawbacks.

Two sample areas were selected for the study: London and Manchester. Both are areas in which sole birth registration is higher than the national average. In order to facilitate a sample frame large enough for purposive sampling (and considering the potentially low response level from an opt-in approach), 630 letters were sent to parents who had registered a birth in the previous six months. This sample frame was divided into: 315 sole registrant mothers; 105 jointly registered parents living at the same address; 105 jointly registered mothers and 105 jointly registered fathers resident at different addresses to the child’s other parent.

A letter was sent from the GRO introducing the research and explaining that parents needed to opt-in to be a potential participant. It explained that the research was exploratory; funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP); the research aims; what a research interviewed involved; that participation was entirely voluntary and that participants were free to withdraw from the research at any point. It included information about the thank you payment of £30 given to participants. This payment was felt to be appropriate as a thank you for people’s time and thoughts and, it was hoped, might encourage responses from a wider range of parents than would otherwise be the case. Participants were invited to reply with their contact details (and therefore, give permission to NatCen’s research team to contact them). A freephone number was set up and people could also choose to reply by e-mail or via return of an enclosed form and a pre-paid reply envelope.
This route was employed to contact parents who would make up the main part of the final sample. The opt-in was not expected to produce adequate levels of response from parents representing the fullest range of parenting circumstances and backgrounds. This was particularly the case with fathers from whom three opt-in responses in total were received. Alternative sampling approaches were made to this group via a range of gate-keepers who then passed information about the study to fathers. Approaches were made to SureStarts and Children’s Centres who were running programmes or activities specifically for fathers, and via a registry office where registrars kindly agreed to give research information to unmarried fathers present at the registration of their child. The same opt-in reply options were given as were used in the main GRO mail-out.

‘Free-find’ supplementary sampling

It was anticipated that there would be a particular set of experiences and issues around birth registrations that would be applicable to couples parenting in same-sex relationships. Researchers made contact with people involved in running gay and lesbian parenting groups. These people then sent information on to group members who had a child under 12 months old. We also sought to snowball the sample by asking participants (at the end of their interview) whether they knew anybody who fitted the profile of parents yet to be included and whether they would pass information to them. Several possibilities were explored by this route but the time-frame of the study was an obstacle to including participants approached in this way. Three lesbian women parenting in cohabitant relationships took part in the research. Their inclusion is likely to illuminate some issues and particular considerations around birth registration decisions faced by same-sex parents but is insufficient to give a comprehensive understanding of the particular issues facing same-sex parents. Further research amongst same-sex parents is discussed in Appendix A.

Non-registrant fathers were a group who were not captured via any of the approaches made. It was felt to be potentially insensitive to ask solely registered mothers about the possible inclusion of their child’s father. This was also an approach that could have undermined a woman’s confidence and comfort with her own participation in the research, if relationships were difficult between parents. As a result of this, attempts were made, instead, to recruit fathers who had not registered on the birth certificate through means of a research study being carried out by GfK NOP on behalf of DWP. Additional screening questions were introduced to a public screening and research recruitment exercise being conducted for this study. GfK NOP were recruiting fathers for focus group participation and gave information about NatCen’s research to fathers who had become a parent within the last year but who had not registered their name on the child’s birth certificate. This approach was unsuccessful. The absence of non-registrant fathers’ views and experiences should be noted by the reader. It is likely that this group would be able to add valuable and useful insights into the issues and decisions surrounding birth registrations. Given the timeframe and policy need, this research was unable
to use sufficient resources to include this group. There is further consideration of this issue in Appendix A.

2.2.2 Selection of participating parents

Selection of parents replying to the opt-in was undertaken to enable purposive sampling. Diversity amongst parents was sought in terms of: registration type; age; gender; ethnicity; and living circumstances.

The findings from the analysis of the MCS revealed that disadvantage was more prevalent amongst sole registrant mothers. It also showed that sole registrant mothers were more likely to be younger and living with parents or in social housing. This finding suggested that it was important to explore how and why sole registration decisions occurred among this group of women.

The opt-in form sent to parents was designed to be simple and asked for information about primary sampling criteria: registration type; age; gender and ethnicity. Participants were asked about their housing circumstances when they were telephoned by researchers about participation. Further information that could have assisted sampling, such as main sources of income or education achievement levels, may not have been obvious in their relevance for participants. A decision was taken by the research team that asking for such information at the screening stage of research participation was inappropriate. This information was collected instead during interviews where the setting was more informal and relevance could be explained by researchers in a face-to-face setting, where needed.

The mail-out sent by GRO received 86 opt-in replies. Further details of the profile of parents opting in but who did not participate in the research are included in the methods appendix. Parents were selected to allow the widest possible diversity of profile and circumstances.

The achieved sample selected from opt-in replies from all approach routes was diverse but did not fulfil every criteria sought. In particular, only one father was found who was a joint registrant but not resident with the mother. Efforts were made to find more fathers in this situation via the range of ‘free find’ approaches outlined above, but time and resource constraints meant limited success. These fathers and non-registrant fathers were areas of the sample the research was unable to fulfil.
Table 2.1 Sample profile overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sole registered</th>
<th>Jointly registered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 years or younger</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25 years old</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30 years old</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40 years old</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 years +</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black African, black Caribbean, black British</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Asian British</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed race</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living arrangements</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with the other parent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole adult in house</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with own parent(s)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with other family members</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (mother and baby unit)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further information was collected about participants’ circumstances during the interview. Participants were parenting in a wide range of social circumstances and living arrangements. There were also variations in the nature of parents’ relationships with the other parent of the recently-registered child. Circumstances relating to housing type, recent house moves and the relationship status with the other parents are profiled in Table 2.2. We also look at whether pregnancies were planned or considered unplanned or a surprise. Where a pregnancy planning status is given as ‘unclear’ this was because participants contradicted themselves, were unclear or had not been comfortable answering the question. We also look at the number of parents who had older children and how many (since this indicates prior experience of registering births).

Some mothers in the study appeared to be vulnerable in some way. A range of the particular issues experienced and barriers faced included: apparent social isolation, relationship breakdown, unstable or temporary housing, mental health difficulties and low incomes. In addition some women had previously had abortions, had had older children removed from their care or had experienced disrupted parenting in their upbringing either through adoption, bereavement or being in care themselves. While these issues were more recurrent amongst the group of women who registered solely, they were not exclusively experienced by this group; joint registrant women also described similar difficulties and personal experiences.
While it is interesting to note that the group of sole registrant mothers does reflect the demography and circumstances outlined from analysis of MCS data in part, there are also sole registrant mothers who do not share similarities with this ‘typical profile’. Joint registrants were sometimes in similar situations, with similar degrees of apparent disadvantage as those typified among sole registrants. While there may be a ‘typical profile’ there are also issues important to parents who are less typical of either registration type.

### Table 2.2 Further sample details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sole registered</th>
<th>Jointly registered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>House moves</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved house since conception</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In current before conception</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tenancy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owned</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privately rented</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rented via council or housing association or housed by NAST</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never were a couple(^1)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship ended during pregnancy</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship ended since birth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A couple at the time of interview</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pregnancy planning</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy planned</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy unplanned</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Older children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or 2 older children</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+ older children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) We used the term ‘a couple’ to mean that the parent saw the relationship (when it existed) as being more meaningful than a casual affair.

### 2.2.3 Interviews with parents

The in-depth interviews were conducted using responsive questioning and probing so that all relevant issues were explored as fully as possible. Interviews were conducted using a topic guide to ensure similar sets of issues were discussed. The topic guide was designed in collaboration with DWP and is shown in Appendix A. Particular flexibility and sensitivity was required due to the wide range of participants’ likely circumstances. Not all topics detailed by the guide were relevant
for each participant. Because interviews were necessarily responsive to participants’
circumstances as well as potentially sensitive, interviews were conducted by more
experienced and senior staff.

Interviews were conducted from late May to early July 2006. Interviews took place
in participants’ homes. Interviews lasted between and one and two hours and
were digitally audio-recorded with participants’ permission. They were transcribed
verbatim and stored in secure electronic files. £30 was given to each participant
to show appreciation for their time and thoughts.

Appendix A gives more information about the nature of the interviews and
participants’ engagement with the research subject.

2.3 Analysis of qualitative data

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were analysed using ‘Framework’, a
method developed by the Qualitative Research Unit at NatCen (Ritchie, Spencer
and O’Connor, 2003). The first stage involved familiarisation with the transcribed
data and identification of emerging issues. This informed the development of a
thematic framework. This was a series of thematic matrices or charts, each chart
representing one key theme. The column headings on each thematic chart related
to key sub-topics and the rows to individual respondents. Data from each case
was then summarised in the relevant cell. The context of the information was
retained and the page of the transcript from which it comes noted so that it was
possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or extract a
verbatim quotation.

The interpretation involved reviewing the full range of views of parenting
circumstances, experiences and decision making about the registration, identifying
patterns, drawing comparisons between individual cases and groups of cases,
and seeking explanations for views, decisions, experiences and diversity through
detailed within, and between, case analysis.
3 Awareness and understanding of registration

This chapter explores the degree to which parents understood the process of registration and what it meant to them. It begins, in Section 3.1, by looking at the awareness parents had about the issues involved in registration, identifying their sources of information and exploring their understanding of the practicalities of the process. Section 3.2 goes on to describe the functions registration was seen as serving and its significance to registrants. Finally, in Section 3.3, the process of registration is placed in the context of parents’ lives and the factors affecting parents’ experiences of registration described.

3.1 Understanding registration

Registration involves a number of practical issues, such as when it must take place and who can do it, as well as having short- and long-term implications for both the infant and the parents. In the short-term registration is required to access a National Health Number, apply for child benefit, etc. It is the first official identity document and as such is a ‘passport’ to health services, benefits and to other forms of identity. The birth certificate is also a means of giving an unmarried father legal parental responsibilities such as the ability to give consent for medical treatment on a child’s behalf or to have a say in their religion or education. In the longer-term a birth certificate can be an important document of identification in adulthood, used for applying for bank accounts, etc. It is also the logical starting point in searches to find absent or uninvolved parents amongst people who seek to trace a birth parent with whom they do not have contact.

Registrations must be made within 42 days of a birth and non-compliance can result in a fine. When parents are married to one another either parent can register the birth and both parents are automatically registered. For unmarried parents the simplest way to jointly register the birth is for both mother and father to
attend registration. Joint registrations can also be made by one parent attending registration and bringing a signed declaration of paternity or maternity from the other parent.

### 3.1.1 Sources of information

New parents received information about registering their child from a wide range of sources but the main channel was the hospital where the child was born. Parents recalled being given a leaflet about registration as part of a pack of information they received when the mother and infant were being discharged. In some cases, hospital staff also talked briefly about the registration process, primarily focusing on the fact that registering births within a certain time period is a legal requirement. Hospital staff also told the parent or parents where they needed to go to register their child, though not in all cases.

The impression given by participants was that hospital staff did not spend much time discussing registration or explaining its implications. Rather if any information was given beyond the information leaflet, it was about when and where to register. It may have been that staff did not see discussing the issues involved in registration as part of their role, though this inference wasn’t made explicitly by parents. People who were already parents sometimes felt that their midwife assumed they had knowledge about registration as a result of having been through the process before. It certainly seemed clear that registration was low down the list of priorities of hospital staff and in one case a parent said that they needed to remind staff repeatedly before they were given the leaflet.

‘Well, they nearly forgot to give it to us…they kept on mentioning it, “Oh, we will bring it to you”, and we were about to go and we hadn’t actually received that…I mean it’s just part and parcel of being short staffed…we did get that information but it was I suppose kind of a bit hurried through, you know.’

(Female, joint registrant, 33 years old, white)

There were other official or semi-official information channels, such as antenatal classes as well as community midwives and health visitors but there were also a number of unofficial sources of information. These included friends and relatives, who in some cases clarified or reinforced messages about registration without being asked by parents, though generally this went no further than reminding them about the fact that there was a time limit. Those parents who had found out more about birth registration had done so either because there were particular reasons why it was important, such as needing to take an infant abroad and therefore, obtain a passport, or as the result of a personal connection or contact. In one case, for example, a family lawyer had initiated a discussion of registration and its implications with the parents.
3.1.2 Understanding of registration

As a consequence of the fact that parents only received a limited amount of information about registration and spent little time if any finding out any more about it (unless there were very specific reasons to do so), there was a lack of clarity about a number of aspects of the process. At its most basic level, parents were confused about the mechanics of registering births, including issues such as whether it was necessary to make an appointment, whether a registrant was allowed to bring someone with them for support or assistance and where they needed to go in order to register.

There was also confusion about what registration entailed or required. The most salient piece of information to parents was that registration was a legal requirement and that it needed to be done within a fixed time period. However, the period within which parents thought registration had to occur ranged from three weeks to 60 days, and even some of those who had gone through the process remained unclear about what the precise time limit had been. There was also a strong belief among both sole and joint registrants that for unmarried couples it was necessary for the father of the child to be physically present in order for him to be recorded on the birth certificate. There was very low awareness of the statutory declaration form and parents reported being told explicitly by hospital staff and registrars’ offices that joint registration was not possible unless the father was present.

‘I did get told that if the father wanted to go on the birth certificate as well, you’d have to do it together. You couldn’t do it without him being there because he had to sign his name, [and] if he didn’t turn up, then obviously he wouldn’t go on the birth certificate.’

(Female, sole registrant, 31 years old, white)

Other areas of confusion included whether infants needed to be present at registration to ‘prove’ that they existed, the costs of obtaining a full birth certificate and the difference between the short and long birth certificates. There was also confusion regarding what surname an infant can have. An assumption was made that if a father co-registered with the mother the child would be given the father’s family name, rather than the parents being able to choose a surname. Similarly, some sole registrants assumed that without the father present for the registration the child could not be given his surname. These assumptions could mean that joint-registration was synonymous with a decision about the child’s surname. Parents who did not make these assumptions were often couples who were cohabiting and who had planned the pregnancy. Other people had discovered that they could give the child any surname at the registration appointment itself.

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9 If the father is unable to go to the registry office with the mother, but still wants his details included, then he can make a statutory declaration acknowledging his paternity, which the mother must give to the registrar (www.gro.gov.uk)
Finally, although some participants talked about the implications of registration for parental responsibility and specifically the implications of registration for paternal responsibility, it did not feature strongly in the responses of either sole or joint registrants, indicating that there was generally a low awareness or understanding of it as an issue. Where parents were aware that registration gave unmarried fathers legal parental responsibility, this had been part of decision-making. This is discussed in Chapter 5.

3.2 Purposes and significance of registration

While some registrants had a low level of awareness and understanding of registration, they were able to identify a wide range of functions that registration served. This section describes the purposes identified by participants and explores the degree to which they felt it was significant.

3.2.1 Purpose of registration

Birth registration was seen as having multiple purposes by both sole and joint registrants. These reflected both ‘official’ functions, linked with administrative and legal requirements, and ‘symbolic’ ones, reflecting the cultural significance of the birth to the individual. The range of purposes are described below:

- **Public record**: the underlying purpose of registration was seen as being to record, officially, that there is a new person in the UK. The process was imagined as the infant being added to a government ‘database’, that was used for census information, maintaining national security and combating crime.

- **Access to services**: registration enabled both the parent and child to gain access to key documents and services such as child benefit, a National Insurance number, passport, registering with a doctor, opening a bank account and in the future, obtaining a driving license and having voting rights.

- **Confirm British nationality**: in cases where one or more of an infant’s parents did not have British citizenship or their country of origin was not the UK, registration was seen as important in confirming the child’s nationality and therefore their rights as a UK citizen.

- **Proving parentage and legitimacy**: for some male participants, being included on the birth certificate was seen as important in confirming them as the father of the child. This seemed to reflect insecurities about the participants’ parenting role, rather than being related to doubts about biological paternity. This seemed to reflect a sense in which mothers had a clearer role and stronger bond with their infant at this early stage. This perhaps explains why these sentiments were echoed by one female respondent. The desire on the part of some respondents, both male and female, for infants to have the paternal surname and for the father to be on the birth certificate even if not involved in the family unit, reflected the fact that registration was seen as emphasising the parental lineage of the infant, though this was not directly related to whether the parents were married.
- **Indicator of parental rights and responsibilities**: being named on the birth certificate was seen as indicating that the individual had both the rights and responsibilities that accompany being a parent. It was seen by some female participants as confirming paternal financial responsibility, though others recognised that a child’s father could be held financially responsible irrespective of whether their name appeared on the birth certificate or not.

Generally, there was a low awareness of the link between the birth certificate and legal parenting rights (for unmarried parents). However, amongst those parents who had sought information about birth registration prior to the appointment, there was some understanding that a father’s presence on a birth certificate gave him legal rights. Legal parenting rights were often understood as a general concept rather than being underpinned by specific awareness of what these legal rights entail. When asked what this meant in practical terms, some parents struggled for any concrete implications. More unusually, others suggested that these rights include the right to make medical decisions and give consent for a child’s treatment and a right to make choices about education and religion.

- **Marker of identity**: birth registration was seen as playing an important role in forming a child’s basic identity by marking its entry into the world and recording key facts such as when and where it was born and who its parents were. Participants used phrases such as ‘so he is someone’, and so she is ‘in the world’ and terms such as ‘heritage’ when describing the importance of registration to the infant’s identity.

### 3.2.2 Significance of registration

Given the importance of registration in terms of indicating parental rights and responsibilities and as a marker of identity, it is not surprising that it was seen as a significant process and in some cases it was described as being similar to, or standing in the place of, a baptism of christening. Implicit in parents’ descriptions of the process was the recognition that its role as ritual was also about confirming their identity as parents. In some cases registration also involved a symbolic recognition of the parents and infant as a ‘family unit’, in part because it was identified as the ‘*only formal step*’ that cohabiting parents undertook as a family.

However, registration was not seen as significant for all participants. Though there were no explicit explanations for why it was seen as significant for some and not others, those parents for whom the event did not seem particularly important either had a low awareness of the purposes of registration (in part perhaps because of the unstable nature of their lives and relationships) or were in stable relationships which meant they may have had other ways of marking the arrival of the infant and recognising their relationship and the family unit or did not feel the need to do so.
Case studies: significance of registration for parents

Case one: The participant lives with her mum, step-father and her two sons. She works two nights a week in a pub and receives Working Families’ Tax Credit (WFTC), Child Tax Credit (CTC) and Child Benefit (ChB). She already had one son, and her pregnancy was unplanned and unwanted. She drank and smoked for a week on discovering the pregnancy in order to try and terminate it without abortion. The child’s father reacted very negatively to news of the pregnancy and he wanted her to abort the pregnancy. She went to have an abortion but decided she couldn’t go through with it, in part in reaction to a previous abortion. She and the father have had no contact since. The participant expressed no awareness of the purpose of registration and felt it was not significant. (Female, sole registrant, 20 years old, white)

Case two: The participant was in a stable relationship with her partner and they had cohabited since they were expecting their older child four years previously. The pregnancy of their youngest child had not been planned but after initial anxieties they were delighted at the news. They were anxious because previous pregnancies following the birth of their first child had ended in miscarriage. The mother was on maternity leave at the time of the interview and planning to resume her part-time job at the end of this period. She saw the birth registration as significant: ‘it does feel quite important that you are making it known this little life exists’. She described how there was a sense of occasion and formality for them in attending the registration. (Female, joint registrant, 42 years old, white)

3.3 Experiences of registration

This section discusses experiences of registration, starting off by placing the process in the context of what is going on in parents’ lives immediately after a child is born before going on to describe the factors contributing to a positive or negative experience of registration.

3.3.1 Context of registration

Before discussing participants’ experiences of registration, it is important to put the process of registration into the context of the lives of new parents. Registration is supposed to occur no more than six weeks after birth and at this point some mothers felt emotionally and physically vulnerable. In some cases, they were in considerable discomfort and subject to significant hormonal fluctuations; one participant, for example, talked about still being ‘wrecked’ six weeks after giving birth. These issues were heightened for those who had complicated births or Caesarean sections. At six weeks, participants were still coming to terms with the responsibilities of parenting and the need to subjugate their own usual routines to the demands of their baby. In addition, sleep deprivation was the norm at this point. In addition, parents having their first child were having to adjust to
the change of identity involved in becoming a parent, while those with unstable relationships with their co-parents experienced additional stresses as a result, often as a result of difficult discussions about the expectations and involvement of the non-resident parent.

All these factors meant that the period after a child was born was emotionally unsettling and for some the process of registering an infant’s birth amplified those emotions, both positive and negative. For lone parents, the experience highlighted the fact that they were not in a stable relationship, while for those who were in a more positive situation, it reinforced the celebratory nature of the birth.

‘Everyone had someone with them, sister, brother, and I was just by myself and I felt like the loneliest person ever.’

(Female, sole registrant, 22 years old, black Caribbean)

‘It was just a day to be chuffed and tell the world you’ve got a child officially on paper rather than just word of mouth.’

(Male, joint registrant, 39 years old, white)

3.3. Factors affecting experiences of registration

It is likely that parents’ emotional states coloured their perceptions of events and even affected the kind of experiences they had, though this was not something that the current study was able to explore. However, it was possible to identify a range of factors that affected parents’ experiences of registration. In some cases these factors combined to mean that participants were ambivalent about the experience, rather than finding it a purely good or bad experience. The range of factors are described below:

• **Staff attitudes**: the attitude of registrars was probably the single most important factor affecting experiences of registration. A positive attitude was characterised by staff being non-judgemental regarding the relationship status of the registrant; taking an interest in the parent and their infant and asking appropriate, informal questions; understanding the needs of the parent, for example in terms of the need to feed their infant; taking time over the registration and not making it feel rushed; and helping to make the event seem joyful by smiling and using appropriate humour.

  ‘We had quite a laugh you know, he was lovely, really nice. And he really made what could have been quite easily a not very joyful experience into a lovely experience really.’

  (Female, sole registrant, 42 years old, white)

Registrars who rushed the process, were not understanding when infants were crying or needed to be fed or had an overly formal demeanour were seen as having a negative attitude.
‘It was very conveyor belt, very “here’s another one, let’s go”…although one is aware that it is a conveyor belt you don’t want to be reminded of it. So, it would have been nice for her to be a bit more enthusiastic, I suppose…because we were quite excited.’

(Female, joint registrant, 36 years old, white)

The attitude of reception staff at the registry office, either when an appointment was booked or when parents attended the office, was also important.

- **Time limit**: awareness that births must be registered within a fixed period caused anxiety about the consequences of not registering in time. In some cases, it was felt that the window for registration was too short, particularly when it coincided with a holiday period such as Christmas or the mother experienced birth complications. For some parents from an African or Caribbean background, the time period had particular significance because of cultural traditions dictating a period of time it is felt appropriate to stay at, or near, home after giving birth; taking the infant into ‘town’ during this period was sometimes seen as too soon to be making such a trip.

- **Appointment flexibility**: flexibility on the part of registry offices in terms of arranging appointments, affected parents feelings about the process, both from a practical point of view but also in terms of giving them a sense of control over the process. Parents liked to be able to choose both the time and the date that was convenient or to be able to turn up without making an appointment at all. For those on low incomes, there was a sense of urgency in getting the infant registered in order to access benefits and there were concerns about not being able to book an appointment early enough. Prompt or long waiting times at the time of the appointment were also significant.

- **Proximity of registry office**: as discussed above, registration occurs within a relatively short period after birth and the trip to the registry office can be a mother’s first significant journey out of the house. Their physical and emotional condition combined with the challenges of transporting an infant, made even short trips seem very daunting for some.

‘I was nervous as well thinking “Oh, my God, this is such an experience for me”. Just the fact that I was out with [infant]. You know, what if she just got a fit in the street, you have so many worries, I just worried about everything. I had never been out with her…you think she is going to catch a bug. I remember it like it was yesterday, it was pretty nerve wrecking.’

(Female, sole registrant, 31 years old, black African)

Parents brought the infant with them either because they did not have someone they could leave the child with, because they believed that the infant needed to be present or because they wanted to be present as a family unit. These issues were compounded if parents had to use public transport, either because they did not own a car or because it was difficult to park near to the registry office. As a rule, the closer the registry office was, the better as far as parents were concerned.
• **Nature of building**: in cases where parents did bring infants, a baby-friendly environment was a significant factor in making the experience more positive. Buildings were seen as baby-friendly where they had somewhere mothers could breast-feed in private, where there were baby-changing facilities and where there were toys. Some parents were also aware of the fact that births and deaths are registered in the same place and felt uncomfortable at the conflicting emotions the different kind of registrants were experiencing. In some cases, parents were also affected by the associations the building had with past experiences, both positive experiences such as marriage and civil partnerships, and negative experiences, such as registering deaths.

• **Ceremony**: although parents did not want registrars to have an overly formal or procedural attitude and wanted the building to offer informal facilities, it was important for some that the registration process itself had a sense of ceremony. This was particularly significant for parents for whom registration took on some of the characteristics of a christening or baptism. Within this context both the way in which the registration was conducted and the environment were important in creating a sense of ‘occasion’. It was felt that the process should not be conducted as if it was just an administrative task but instead, should have an appropriate degree of formality and be taken ‘seriously’. Similarly, it was felt an historic building with old or antique artefacts and pictures was an appropriate reflection of the occasion.

• **Relationships status**: while there did not seem to be any social stigma associated with being an unmarried mother, some female participants said they felt embarrassed when registering the birth of their child because they were not accompanied by a partner. This feeling was mirrored by those who were accompanied by their partners who were pleased that the baby’s father was there and said they would have felt embarrassed if the father had not been present.

### 3.3.3 Particular issues for lesbian couples

While many of the issues discussed above are equally relevant for women in same-sex relationships, there were some particular issues for lesbian parents. In part, this reflected the fact that they were in a different legal situation to heterosexual parents and because of this, lesbian parents had researched the issues before the birth of their child and in some cases, had discussed registration within parenting groups and legal workshops.

Among this group, there were two attitudes regarding the nature of birth certificates. The first attitude was that it was a document reflecting the biological parentage of an infant and as a result it was accepted that the non-biological co-parent did not have their name on it. In contrast, the second attitude was that the rules governing who is allowed to go on the birth certificate reflected a gender bias because if a heterosexual couple has conceived a child through a sperm donor, the non-biological father can be recorded on the birth certificate.
Those who viewed the rules as having a gender bias found the situation difficult to accept and in one case a parent said the issue was ‘politicised’ for them.

Another issue faced by couples in same-sex relationships was the fact that the process of registration highlighted the fact that they were in a different situation from heterosexual registrants, particularly when asked about the birth father of the child. In terms of their experience of registration, the attitude of registrars to them as same-sex couples was critical, with some registrars seeming to be more comfortable in interactions with same-sex parents than others.

3.4 Conflict between understanding and significance

This chapter has described how parents have a relatively low awareness and understanding of even some of the most basic aspects of registration and yet registration is seen as serving a number of important functions and can be experienced as personally significant. This prompts the question, if registration is seen as significant, why do people not find out more information about it or try to understand the implications of it better?

As was indicated in the previous section, birth involves many stresses and strains and one explanation for the paradox is that new parents do not have the time or energy to find out more about registration. This certainly seems to part of the answer but there are indications that another interpretation is also possible and this is that parents were affected by what could be termed ‘induced passivity’. Participants were very aware that registration was a legal requirement and so may have felt it was something that happened ‘to’ them rather than something they ‘did’. This was coupled with a concept that ‘everybody knows’ you have to register a child. This could have led them to assume that they would be told what they needed to know and what was important rather than feeling they had to actively find out about it or that they had sufficient information already. It may also be that participants, in lacking awareness of the different implications of a birth certificate, fail to see any reason to actively seek information; registering a baby is not conceived of instinctively as something about which a decision needs to be made, rather it is an administrative requirement that has to be fulfilled. One participant, for example, who learnt during the interview that the father of her child could have sent a statutory declaration form instead of being physically present, reacted by saying they wished that had been ‘offered’ to her at the time, a tellingly passive construction.

This interpretation is supported by the example of sole registrants in same-sex relationships. In their case registration was significant but not automatic; parents had to find out that the non-biological parent could not be included on the birth certificate. As a result, parents in this position actively researched the issue. This adds weight to the interpretation that, at least in part, it is the degree to which the process is seen as ‘automatic’ because of understandings already held about
function and implications, rather than simply its significance, which is key to active engagement.

3.5 Chapter summary

The main source of information parents receive about birth registration is a leaflet included in a pack of information given to parents when the mother and child are discharged from hospital. There was minimal discussion with hospital staff, and where this did occur it focused on basic issues such as the time period within which infants should be registered.

There was a lack of clarity among parents over the practicalities of registering, such as whether an appointment is necessary, as well as substantive issues. There was particular confusion around the issue of whether unmarried fathers have to be physically present at the registration in order to be included on the birth certificate. In part, this confusion appears to stem from the fact that parents were told explicitly that fathers needed to be present by registrars’ offices and hospital staff.

Registration was seen as having multiple purposes, including practical ones such as enabling parents to claim ChB or register the infant with a doctor. Registration also had important symbolic functions, such as affirming parental rights and responsibilities and as a marker of a child’s identity. As a result, registration was seen as a significant event and in some cases it was seen as equivalent to a christening or baptism.

Experiences of registration were affected by the physical and emotional state of the mother post-birth and the nature of the relationship between the co-parents. Experiences were also affected by a number of other factors, the most significant of which was the attitude and behaviour of the registrar and particularly their ability to both personalise the experience and endow it with an appropriate level of formality.
4 Choices and decision making about birth registration

This chapter explores the extent to which the unmarried parents who took part in this study exercised choice and engaged in decision making about birth registration options. There are two possible birth registration options for unmarried parents, sole registration by the mother and joint registration by both birth parents. In theory, therefore, parents have the opportunity to exercise choice and make an informed decision about which option to take. We will discuss how far this is borne out in practice, before turning to the factors which inform decision making in Chapter 5.

4.1 A spectrum of choices and decisions

The extent to which unmarried parents who participated in this study exercised choice and made informed decisions about which birth registration option to take can be mapped on a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, there were birth mothers who were, in practice, prevented from exercising a choice or making an informed decision by circumstances relating to the birth father. At the other, there were birth parents (both mothers and fathers), who consciously exercised choices and made decisions that resulted in both sole and joint birth registration.

The discussion will reveal that parents’ immediate choices and decisions about birth registration options need to be understood in the context of the wider circumstances in which the birth of the child takes place. These include the circumstances of the pregnancy and the relationship between the parents before, during and after it. In reality this may have a profound effect, not merely on the extent to which choices and decisions are made but also on whether they are made consciously or unconsciously. In some circumstances it may determine whether it is possible for birth mothers to exercise choice at all. As we will go on to discuss in Chapter 6, this has a bearing on the extent to which it might be
possible to develop policies and practices which have an impact on the choices and decisions made by unmarried parents in the wider population.

Along the spectrum four broad positions emerge, upon which the experiences of participants can be mapped. These can be described as follows:

- choice and decision making negated;
- choice and decision making compromised;
- choice exercised but not experienced as a decision making process;
- choice exercised and informed by decision making process.

The complex interplay of circumstances, choices and decision making that was evident means that in practice these positions are more complicated than they first appear. It is particularly important to note that this research was based on individual interviews with one parent, be they sole or joint registrants. Although we did ask participants to discuss the perceptions and experiences of the other parent, the extent to which it was possible for them to do so was sometimes limited, as was the extent to which they were willing to do so. This means that participants understandably tended to focus on their own individual choices and decisions, rather than those of both parents. This was particularly the case with sole registrants whose choices and decisions were negated or compromised by the choices and decisions made by the other parent over which they had limited or no influence.

4.2 Exploring the spectrum

We will now go on to discuss the way in which the experiences of participants map onto the spectrum in more detail.

4.2.1 Choice and decision making negated

Within the ‘choice and decision making negated’ position, two different experiences were evident:
• **Identity of father unknown**: There were two contrasting types of experience here, one that involved planned pregnancy and the other that involved unplanned pregnancy. The first experience was where mothers in same-sex relationships had conceived through artificial insemination via an unknown donor provided by a clinic\(^{10}\). By its very nature this had involved carefully planning. Because the donor had been provided by a clinic, the legal process required the identity of the donor to be unknown. The children born through donor insemination arranged in this way will have the right to access information about their birth fathers when they are 18. Until that time the anonymity of the father is protected and therefore, unknown to the mothers concerned. Mothers describing this experience explained that sole registration had been the only option open to them. However, this was explained not only in terms of the anonymity of the father but also in relation to the inability to name the non-biological mother (i.e. the birth mother’s partner) on the birth certificate.

In contrast, the second type of experience involved unplanned pregnancy where the mother had conceived as a result of a one off, casual sexual encounter. The example of this experience within the sample involved a mother who described returning to the place where she had met the father in an attempt to locate him. She had done this, not because she felt that he should be involved in raising the child or contributing financially, but simply so that she could provide the child with information about the father’s identity. She explained that at the birth registration she had wanted to cry because she could not contribute that information to the child’s identity. This was particularly resonant for her because she had two older children, one of whom she had registered on a sole basis, from who with hindsight, she felt she had ‘taken something’ by registering the birth alone.

• **Whereabouts of father unknown**: In this instance both the mother and the father were asylum seekers. The pregnancy had been unplanned and the father had wanted the mother to have an abortion, to which she had been opposed on religious grounds. Although she and the father had been in a relationship for some time before she became pregnant (having actually met in another country), she had not had any contact with him after this discussion. Her preference would have been joint registration but in any case she had no means of contacting him.

### 4.2.2 Choice and decision making compromised

Within this position there were again two different experiences, which related first to mothers’ understanding of the birth registration process and second to the actions of fathers. In both cases the ability of mothers to exercise choice and make informed decisions was compromised by circumstances, but the theoretical level of control which they might have had varied.

\(^{10}\) Heterosexual couples using clinic-provided sperm donation would presumably share this aspect of experience. The study sample did not include any heterosexual parents who had conceived in this way.
• **Lack of understanding of registration process**: There were a number of examples of mothers who had registered the birth of the child on a sole basis where lack of understanding of the registration process had constrained their ability to exercise choice. In one case, the mother had assumed she could include the father on the birth certificate, but had not realised that to enable this to happen he needed to fill in a form or be present. In contrast other mothers felt they had no choice but to register solely because it was not possible for the fathers to be physically present at the registration appointment, either because they were out of the country or because they were in prison. As noted in Chapter 2, there was very little awareness of the ability to register a father using the paternity declaration form without his being present at the registration.

• **Father non-co-operation or refusal**: There were two types of experience that involved non-co-operation or refusal on the part of the father, which in turn meant that the mother felt she had no choice but to register on a sole basis. The first included fathers who refused to acknowledge paternity or explicitly stated they wanted nothing to do with the baby, while the second involved fathers who accepted paternity but refused to register on a joint basis. The point at which mothers felt they had no choice occurred both before and after the birth.

Amongst those who refused to register on a joint basis, the point at which refusal took place varied, as did the degree of clarity about the father’s refusal on the part of the mother. Cases where the mother was clear the father had refused included the father refusing to attend at all, agreeing to attend but not showing up and finally showing up but not going in. Fathers who refused to attend at all, had in some cases earlier expressed the view that the mother should terminate the pregnancy. In other cases there was some ambiguity about how far the father not registering actually coincided with the mother’s wishes, or the extent to which the mother made this assumption on his behalf, without discussion, based on his lack of involvement.

The extent to which mothers in this group were amenable to re-registering on a joint basis in the future varied. One perspective was that if fathers changed their minds (and behaviours) it would be a welcome shift which could result in re-registration on a joint basis. A contrasting perspective was that the fathers had made their choices and should not be given opportunities to register jointly in the future.
Case example: father’s refusal compromising decision making

This full-time mother (who was in receipt of Income Support) had registered her child solely. The child and his older brother shared a father and the older son had been jointly registered. The mother described how the father and she had discussed joint registration of this younger child and joint registration had been her expectation. On arrival at the registry office she described how he refused to come inside and waited for her outside the building. She felt it likely this had always been his intention and that his refusal was motivated by a desire to avoid contact from the Child Support Agency (CSA) and financial responsibility. At interview she described how they were no longer a couple, having ended their on-off relationship shortly after registration. Joint re-registration was not an option this mother was amenable to: ‘I’d fight him every single step of the way [if he wanted to re-register jointly] because if he didn’t put his name on in the first place, why change it…The proof is in the pudding. [It is] now that [child] needs teething gel, now he needs nappies. Not later on…’

(Female, sole registrant, 37 years old, white)

4.2.3 Choice exercised but not experienced as a decision

We now turn to the next broad position on the spectrum where choice was exercised in relation to birth registration options but not experienced as a decision making process. Here, the difference between sole and joint registrants was quite distinct. For joint registrants, exercising choice did not necessarily involve an informed decision but it was, in effect, a shared choice. For sole registrants on the other hand the choice was neither shared nor made on the basis of an informed decision. In these cases whilst decisions had been made about related issues such as naming, these were not made with registration options in mind. Although effectively choices were made, they did not come about as a result of the pros and cons of the two options being weighed up.

• ‘No brainer’ or automatic choice: Joint registrants who occupied this position on the spectrum were typically in long-term cohabitant relationships. Joint registration was usually a natural reflection of family set-up, paternal involvement and perceived equal parenting status. The influences on the registration ‘choice’ of parents are discussed in Chapter 5. In these situations the alternative sole registration was not considered. Neither was joint registration necessarily discussed but it was experienced as a shared and automatic assumption. Both joint registrant mothers and fathers who participated in the study echoed this view.

‘Well, it was a no-brainer, really. He’s my partner, we live together and he’s his dad and, you know, as far as I’m concerned, we share parental responsibility and that’s that really.’

(Female, joint registrant, 42 years old, white)
• **No discussion or parental conflict**: On the other hand there were examples of sole registrant mothers who felt that they had no choice but in practice did exercise one. These cases differed from those where choice had been compromised as there was no evidence that the fathers of these solely registered children would have refused to co-operate with a joint registration. However, unlike those who made a conscious decision, these women did not experience the registration type as a conscious decision making process. They went ahead with sole registration either not having discussed it with the father or after difficult negotiations ‘just went and did it’. These discussions were not necessarily explicitly about birth registration, but were often related to the mother’s perception of the level, or in some cases complete absence, of paternal involvement or engagement. A common underlying source of conflict was the father’s desire for the child to be given his surname without (in the mother’s view) contributing sufficiently to their care or financially providing for them. Here sole mothers often described the ideal registration type as joint, although they did not feel this had been achievable in the circumstances.

• **Lack of paternal involvement assumed**: There were also mothers who assumed, based on a lack of paternal involvement so far and a lack of any contact from the father, that they were ‘on their own’ with the child in every sense. These women sometimes knew where the father was and could contact him if necessary. However, this was not always the case; some had moved since the parents were together and women knew their whereabouts roughly, rather than knowing an address. Often, the only way for the mother to contact the father was by mobile phone. There was a sense here, often implicit, that it should be up to the father to initiate discussion or make the effort to find out about registration arrangements and attend. A common feature of their relationship with the father was that it had broken down during the pregnancy and there had been no contact between the pregnancy becoming known and the birth of the child. Women in these situations gave varying levels of consideration to sole registration but reported feeling a lack of options available to them about the registration type. Again, it can be seen as a reflection of the parenting status and involvement of the father at the time of registration.
Case example: lack of paternal involvement assumed by mother

This mother and the father of her child had been a couple for 18 months at the time the pregnancy was discovered. It was unplanned and was described as a shock. She described how the child’s father was initially pleased about the pregnancy but seemed to have a change of heart in the following months. The couple split up four months into the pregnancy. The mother described how the father later accused her of infidelity and denied his paternity. She saw this as his way of ensuring he was devoid of any responsibility and felt he knew it not to be the case. He had not seen the child, nor had any contact with him. The mother had not discussed registration with him because ‘it would have been a waste of time asking him anyway. He wouldn’t. I know he wouldn’t [have come]. I know him better than that. Even when I was in hospital ill with the baby he wouldn’t come.’ (Female, sole registrant, 21 years old, white)

- Lack of paternal involvement chosen: Finally, this group also included a lesbian couple who had used sperm from a known donor to conceive. They had started trying to conceive using clinic-donated sperm but this had been unsuccessful, had exhausted their finances and had involved a miscarriage. They were clear that they merely wanted a donor, not a father, as was their donor. While, they could have chosen to include the donor’s name on the birth certificate, they did not consider this option because it would have given legal parental responsibility to the donor. This was at odds with their agreement with him and indeed, could have discouraged him from being a donor. The issues involved in who should or could register within this case are further discussed in Chapter 5.

4.2.4 Choice exercised and informed by decision making

Finally, we turn to the position on the spectrum where there was evidence both of choice being exercised and of informed decision making. Both joint and sole registrant participants occupied this position, though amongst joint registrants, they were typically women. Amongst those who exercised choice and made a decision, there were examples of both planned and unplanned pregnancies amongst joint registrants and unplanned pregnancies amongst sole registrants. A variety of factors were evident in decision making, which could involve compromise. These are explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

Those occupying this point on the spectrum both exercised choice and made conscious decisions about birth registration options in the process of doing so. Joint registrants who occupied this position on the spectrum included those in stable cohabiting relationships, those who were no longer a couple at the point of registration and in one instance, a couple who had previously separated and then reunited. There was also one example of a woman who had initially registered solely but subsequently re-registered jointly.
It is worth noting that the dominant experience of cohabiting joint registrants was that they never considered sole registration as a real option. Rather, they were aware that they had a choice and took a variety of factors into account when coming to the conclusion that joint registration was appropriate or beneficial. The experiences of non-cohabiting joint registrants appeared to be different. For example, there were examples of mothers who had registered jointly (including a re-registration) but for whom this had been a conscious decision exercised after the implications of sole registration had been considered. In one case the subsequent withdrawal of involvement by the father had made the mother regret the decision.

Where an informed decision had been made, both parents had usually played a role in making it. It was, though, acknowledged to be a situation in which mothers potentially held the power since they could register alone or deny a claim for paternity. For some mothers this ‘power’ was seen as appropriate given that they assumed the majority (or all) of the responsibility for the child’s care – as the main care giver they should have the primary say about the child’s registration. Others, though, recognised that joint registration provided a means of giving the father security because it ensured joint parental responsibility. A different perspective articulated by a father was that it was too easy for women to wield such power inappropriately, rather than with consideration for the child’s best interest.

Joint registrant men who participated in this study generally fell into the ‘no brainer’ or ‘automatic’ choice category described above (where choice was exercised, although sole registration was not considered and so effectively there was no decision to make).

The exception was a male joint registrant participant who had sought to influence the mother of the child’s choice on the basis of his previous experience of sole registration, which he felt threatened his parental rights. Thus, in contrast to the ‘father refusal or non-co-operation’ experience of mothers described above, here the power and control in relation to choice of birth registration options was perceived by the father to lie with the mother.

This illustrates the way in which the dynamic within a relationship between two parents impacted on how the experience maps onto the spectrum. For example, if the mother had refused to register jointly, the father’s account may have led to it being mapped onto the ‘choice and decision making compromised’. Alternatively, had the mother been interviewed, her account of the decision to register could have been articulated as a compromise.

Amongst sole registrants at this point on the spectrum, two different experiences were described. The first was similar to the experience of women who occupied the previous position on the spectrum (exercised choice but not experienced as a decision), in that there was evidence of parental conflict about naming, religion and involvement. It was also similar in that, like those who just went ahead and did it, the mother registered the birth on the spur of the moment. What made
her experience distinct was that she was not prepared to compromise about these issues and crucially, that she saw the decision to register on a sole basis as connected to this unwillingness to compromise.

The second experience of sole registration at this point on the spectrum involved a mother who made a conscious decision to register on her own because she felt it was the best way to promote paternal involvement. The parents were still in a relationship and the father had some involvement with the child. The mother felt that the involvement of the CSA, which might result from joint registration, would undermine that involvement.

Generally, the parents of the child were the only people involved in the decision about birth registration. Parents’ mothers had contributed to this thinking in more unusual cases. Maternal grandmothers advocated both for and against joint registration in different situations. Paternal grandmothers reportedly sometimes advised their son not to be on the birth certificate if there was any doubt (as far as he was concerned) about the paternity of the child. Participants reported listening to these views but usually felt that they had made their own decisions, independent of their mother’s or ex-partner’s mother’s views.

Table 4.1 summarises the various positions of parents in relation to the spectrum of choices and decision making

**Case examples: conscious decision making where both registration types were considered**

**Case one**: This couple had separated during the (unplanned) pregnancy and had had no contact with one another from this point until the birth. During this period this mother imagined she would register the child alone. During labour the maternal grandmother phoned the father-to-be. He was present for the birth and involved with the child in her first few weeks. A joint registration was made and contact with the father continued, although the mother described contact between her and him as fraught with conflict and difficulty. A few weeks after registering the birth there was a particularly heated exchange between the parents. At the time of interview this had been the last time the father had seen his child and the mother felt contact was made impossible by the continued friction between her and the father. The joint registration was a decision shadowed by regret for her at the time of the research interview. (Female, joint registrant, 20 years old, mixed race)

Continued
Case two: In this case the pregnancy was described as planned but had happened more quickly than anticipated. The mother described the father as having a ‘change of heart’ early in the pregnancy; seeming to become increasingly withdrawn and unenthusiastic about becoming a parent. The couple split up, reconciled and then separated again before the birth. The father was at the birth and initially involved with the child. They had discussed joint registration during the pregnancy but between the birth and registration the mother came to feel that the father’s involvement was unreliable and left her with all responsibility for the child. In this period decisions around naming the child became a source of argument. The father reportedly issued an ultimatum: to give the child his name (and therefore, as he understood it, to register jointly) or he would cease contact. The mother made a sole registration, giving the child her surname, in part, because she felt as the parent with full-time responsibility it was inappropriate for the child to have her father’s name. Further discussions continued after registration and with time the tone was less fraught with conflict. The mother eventually decided to re-register jointly. Her concern here was to promote the paternal involvement and welfare of the child despite her perception that the father’s lack of reliable involvement (and the couple’s separation) diminished his right for the child to have his name. She described this decision as a considered compromise. (Female, joint registrant (initially sole), 29 years old, mixed race)

Case example: power in decision making perceived to lie with mother

This father had several children with the same woman. He described their relationship as having been on and off over a period of over five years. When together they cohabited and during their numerous separation, he left the shared home. The older children were solely registered and these registrations had occurred during periods of separation. The father described himself as being denied access to the children during periods of separation, something that he previously had sought to challenge legally. He had come to understand that his ability to seek a legal solution was severely impaired by the children’s sole registration; he saw himself as being without legal paternal rights. During the pregnancy of the youngest child he sought a joint registration not just for the new baby, but a joint re-registration of the older children too. This was something he saw as giving him the legal rights he may need in the future should history repeat itself. He felt that it was within the mother’s power alone to grant or deny him these legal rights and described himself as ‘manipulating’ her toward joint registration. (Male, joint registrant, 36 years old, white)
Table 4.1  Overview: Spectrum of choice and decision making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location on the spectrum</th>
<th>Factors constraining or enabling choice and decision making</th>
<th>Registration type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice and decision making negated</td>
<td>Identity of father unknown</td>
<td>Sole registrant mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice and decision making compromised</td>
<td>Whereabouts of father unknown</td>
<td>Sole registrants mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice exercised but not experienced as a decision</td>
<td>Lack of understanding</td>
<td>Joint registrant mothers/fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father refusal or non-co-operation</td>
<td>Sole registrant mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘No-brainer’ or automatic choice (sole registration not considered)</td>
<td>Sole registrant mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No discussion or parental conflict</td>
<td>Sole registrant mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of parental involvement assumed</td>
<td>Sole registrant mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of parental involvement chosen</td>
<td>Sole registrant mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice exercised and informed decision made</td>
<td>Sole registration considered most appropriate</td>
<td>Sole registrant mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conscious decision to register jointly after sole registration considered</td>
<td>Joint registrant mothers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Making a fully informed choice: who is involved?

Our analysis demonstrates that where parents fell on the spectrum depended on a range of factors. These included parental reactions to the pregnancy and the birth, the nature and stability of parents’ relationships, the extent to which parents understood and were aware of the implications of the registration process, the level of paternal involvement and mothers’ perceptions about whether paternal involvement would be facilitated by sole or joint registration.

The sequence of events described by parents also influenced where cases appeared on the spectrum. Non-co-operation on the part of either parent at the point when the pregnancy is discovered could negate the ability of the other to exercise choice and make an informed decision further down the line. On the other hand non-co-operation later, for example on the day of the registration appointment, could compromise the ability of either party to make a choice and of both parties to make a shared decision. A further factor which determined where cases appeared on the spectrum was whose interpretation was being given. Whilst respondents were asked to reflect on the views and experiences of the other parent, it was inevitably their accounts which took precedence. It is important to note here that the sample did not include any fathers of sole registered children.

It is not surprising that the experiences of participants in this study suggests that making a fully informed and shared choice about which birth registration option to take is dependent on dialogue and co-operation between both birth parents. This could simply be about using the paternity declaration form. In practice however, choices and decisions taken by either party independently of the other will compromise or negate that possibility. The experiences of lesbian mothers also demonstrate that there may be a desire for someone other than a birth parent to be party to the choice and decision making, with or without the involvement of a birth father.
What is particularly significant for policy is that the research shows that choices and decisions are made about issues which are not necessarily perceived or understood by parents to be related to birth registration. In practice these choices and decisions can have a significant bearing on what happens with regard to birth registration. Thus, while dialogue and co-operation can facilitate informed and shared choices about birth registration, it can only do so if the process and its significance are fully understood as early as possible. As we will go on to explore in Chapter 6, this has implications for the timing and nature of interventions to raise awareness and understanding.

The absence of any official guidance or advice as to who should be on the birth certificate was striking; it occurred across the sample. No-one felt they had received advice about the registration type prior to the registration appointment itself. Some sole registrant mothers who felt as though they had made a decision would have liked to discuss the issue with someone and know whether they ‘did the right thing’ or not. Other women felt it would have been useful to talk it through with someone who knew about ‘the system’. The first and only discussions sole registrant mothers had with any official about who was to be on the birth certificate was with their registrar, at the registration appointment itself. This, coupled with some limited awareness about aspects of the registration (like whether fathers needed to be present to co-register), suggests there could be a helpful role for official guidance, for some parents.

4.4 Chapter summary

The extent to which choices and decisions are made can be mapped on a spectrum which includes four broad positions: choice and decision making negated; choice and decision making compromised; choice exercised but not experienced as a decision making process; and choice exercised and informed by decision making process. A summary of this spectrum is provided in Table 4.1.

Parents’ immediate choices and decisions about birth registration options need to be understood in the context of the wider circumstances in which the birth of the child takes place. These include the circumstances of the pregnancy and the relationship between the parents before, during and after it.

Where the experiences of parents appear on the spectrum depends on a range of factors including the relationship between the parents, the timing of one parent’s non-co-operation with the other, understanding of the registration process and the nature of paternal involvement.

Even where parents do exercise choices about birth registration, they may do so without weighing up the pros and cons of both options. They may also make choices and decisions about other issues without understanding their relevance to birth registration options.
Making a fully **informed** and **shared** choice about which birth registration option to take is also contingent on a combination of parental dialogue and cooperation **and** understanding of the registration process and its significance. In practice, however, either party could make independent choices or decisions that compromise or negate that possibility. And there may be others involved in the process with a direct or indirect interest in caring for the child.
5 Motivations for sole or joint birth registration

The previous chapter looked at the extent to which choice was exercised in relation to registration type and informed by decision making. This chapter explores the factors which appeared to motivate choices and decision making, where they existed, in relation to birth registration type. It is worth noting that similar issues were described by parents whose ability to make a choice had been negated or compromised. These parents’ perceptions of the ideal registration scenario were underpinned by similar factors.

The factors described by parents included a range of influences and considerations which fell into three broad categories:

• the rights and identity of the child;
• parental rights and responsibilities; and
• the relationship between parents.

Different considerations and influences were important in different parenting situations and registration types. This chapter describes the influences and considerations comprising the motivating factors across the range of participants’ circumstances. We consider how specific sets of influences and considerations differed between different types of participants or between particular situations.

In Section 5.2 we look at the way in which the different motivating factors interacted with each other. The importance attributed to different factors varied between parenting situations. The section examines which factors bore greater influence and under what circumstances. It looks at the issues that were particular and specific to same-sex couples (the many shared considerations for these and other parents are explored throughout the chapter). Parents were often explicit in their accounts about the interaction of different factors. At other times the interaction of the different issues involved was implicit and inferred during analysis.

The chapter concludes in Section 5.3 with a summary of the key findings explored throughout the chapter.
5.1 Motivations in birth registration:

When thinking about the birth registration process there were often a multiplicity of issues involved. These are made up of influences and considerations which, together, comprised broader motivational factors. Different combinations of influences and considerations were evident in making up the factors. Some differences are based on the family and parenting situation and other considerations ranged across the group of parents. This section looks at these motivations in detail.

5.1.1 The rights and the identity of the child

The rights and identity of the child were closely bound with one another and this motivation was often about the child’s rights in relation to their identity.

- **The right to know who both parents are** (and having this information without needing to rely on either parent in the future for it). This consideration was particularly emphasised by some sole-registered mothers parenting alone, where the father had (at the time of interview) so far been absent from the child’s life or had little involvement. It was also a consideration where fathers were involved, although it did not have the same relevance.

- **The right of children to be able to search for their birth father, in the future.** Parents saw the birth certificate as the logical starting point for a child in any future search for the birth father. The birth certificate also offered this independently of the mother. This right was emphasised where fathers had not seen their child nor had contact since the birth. This was not always possible to fulfil; where the whereabouts or identity of the father was unknown or women had believed the other parent had to be present to at the time of registration, sole registrations had occurred despite this belief.

- **The ability to access genetic information** (e.g. genetic illnesses). This specific belief around the child’s rights was closely aligned to their right to know both parents and be able to search for an absent father later in life. This right was underlined by women who had conceived using sperm donation and by lone mothers who were not in contact with the child’s father. Again, these were often situations in which decision making about the registration had been negated or compromised and so could not necessarily be a right that was granted in these circumstances.

- **Legal safeguard for the child.** There was a particular awareness amongst some cohabiting couples that the presence of a birth father on the birth certificate gave that person legal parental responsibilities. Where birth parents were raising a child together, this provided a safeguard for the child should anything happen to the mother. A father’s presence on the birth certificate would clarify the father’s position as legal guardian and parent. There was less apparent awareness of this issue amongst women parenting alone and those where the father had minimal contact. This issue was difficult for same-sex couples in particular circumstances because a non-biological parent cannot be on the birth certificate. This is discussed fully in Section 5.2.2.
• **A reflection of care and acknowledgement of the child.** The presence of a father’s name on the birth certificate was described as demonstrating acknowledgement, of and regard for, that child; it was seen as a reflection of his emotional bond to the child. The acknowledgement of paternity on the birth certificate was seen to be for the child’s benefit in this regard. This, it was felt, would be more important once the child was older and saw their own birth certificate. In some sole registrations women wondered how they would explain the father’s absence from the certificate to the child in the future. Parents’ views in relation to this were sometimes influenced by their own experiences; people who had not had a father’s name on their own birth certificate described a sense of hurt at this absence. The child’s feelings about their birth certificate were a consideration across registration and family types.

  ‘I always thought about putting the baby’s dad on. Even if I wasn’t with him. Even if I split up before…Because that’s the way I’ve been brought up. My mum didn’t put the name of my dad and I am suffering now…it’s confusing because there is no name on my birth certificate whatsoever.’

  (Female, joint registrant, 19 years old, white)

This issue was also emphasised where mothers felt that the father of the child had (unreasonably) questioned the paternity of the child after initially accepting that they were the father. Women here felt that once registered on a birth certificate, the father could not deny their paternity of the child at any future point.

Where this issue was less discussed, mothers felt that the birth certificate had little meaning and perceived it as having no more significance than the fulfilling of a legal requirement.

• **Naming the child.** As Chapter 3 described, there was a lack of clarity around a parent’s presence at the birth registration and the ability to use their family name for the child. This was often coupled with an assumption that a joint registration meant the child automatically carried their father’s family name. In some circumstances it was felt to be important that the child had the father’s name. This belief was not one-sided; mothers often felt it was important that the child had their surname. The importance of sharing the paternal surname was emphasised by some cohabiting couples in stable relationships where both parents were involved in the child’s care on a day-to-day basis. This was also important in cases where parents were not together as a couple but the father had some involvement with the child. Giving a child the father’s name was described as a culturally appropriate or a natural decision for fathers who were Black Caribbean, Black African, Asian or Muslim. Both where parents were a couple and where they were not, giving the child the father’s surname was seen to ‘solidify’ the bond (39L) between father and child.
‘I am his dad, I want to be recognised...I want to be on the birth certificate, I am the last of the [surname], no-one else can carry the name on so I am going on that birth certificate and he is going to have my name...When I say recognition I mean like I say I am the last of the [surname] and its something I want to frame, yes I have a son he can carry the name on, it’s great.’

(Male, joint registrant, 38 years old, white)

Where contact between father and child was seen as precarious and giving a child a father’s name was voiced as important by the father, naming a child in this way was motivated by promoting paternal involvement. This is further discussed in Section 5.1.2.

- **Consistency between siblings.** Parents were concerned to achieve consistency and parity between siblings. Ideally, this meant that siblings who shared a father should have both the same type of registration and surname. Again, parents’ own experiences could be a motivating influence in support of consistency. Where registration type or surname were not consistent, mothers worried about how they would explain differences between siblings when children were older. Consistency around surnames was also important between siblings. Parents wanted the sibling relationship ‘validated’ to the outside world by a shared surname. Because of the associations sometimes made between registration type and surname, wanting consistency for siblings could argue for or against joint registration.

**Case example: consistency around registration type and family name**

One woman, in her 30s, was mother to three children. The two older children shared the same father and the father of her youngest child was a different man. There was a significant age gap between the older children and the youngest infant. The older children had been registered differently; one was registered solely, one jointly. The one who had been registered jointly had been alone in the family in having his father’s surname. When that relationship had ended the mother changed the child’s name by deed poll. This was so that he shared a surname with his mother and brother. It was important to the mother, partly to say that they were a family and partly because of the confusion caused in nursery by the boys’ different names. When her youngest child was born it was important to the mother that she also shared the same family name. (Female, sole registrant, 32 years old, white)
Concern was evident for some women in using the father’s name for their child. They worried that the father’s tentative involvement would diminish with time and that he would eventually have little or no contact with the child. This child would then have the surname of a parent they do not see and who plays no role in their daily life. Mothers worried that it would be hurtful and confusing for the child to carry the name of a person who does not acknowledge them or show them the appropriate level of care. This was further compounded in cases where the father’s parents and wider family were either unaware of the child or did not acknowledge them as part of their family. Lone mothers also worried the practical and logistical difficulties that could arise because their surname is different to their child’s.

Influences and considerations around the rights and identity of the child usually pointed toward joint registration. There was an acknowledgement of the importance of these issues amongst some sole registrants who had had little choices compromised or negated. The absence of these rights could be seen as a particular down-side to sole registration, although some could be substituted by the mother providing information about the father directly to the child. However, the rights and identity of the child did not always point to joint registration between birth parents. This was the case (in some aspects) for a same-sex couple. This is discussed in full in Section 5.2.2.

5.1.2 The rights and responsibilities of parents

The rights and responsibilities of parents were much discussed in the context of birth registration considerations. They often mirrored the rights of the child because it is the parents’ responsibilities that fulfil these rights. Discussions about parental rights and responsibilities in relation to the birth registration largely focused on the father (among heterosexual parents). This was because both the mother’s presence on the birth certificate and her rights and responsibilities were seen as automatically given. Maternal responsibilities are, therefore, seen as automatic in relation to the birth certificate and so not an area for choice or decision making. Decision making about registration type is essentially the choice of whether the father co-registers and for this reason it was logical that parents’ discussions focused on paternal involvement, rights and responsibilities.
The following considerations and influences comprised this motivating factor:

- **Ensuring legal rights and responsibilities.** There was an awareness on the part of some cohabiting couples that legal parental responsibility was given to the father (only) by being registered on the birth certificate. While some participants were unclear as to the detail of legal parental responsibility, others listed particular rights such as the ability to make medical decisions and to make choices about a child’s education, religion, etc. (see Section 3.2.1 – parents who had independently looked into birth registrations had better awareness of this). There was less discussion and apparent awareness about this issue for sole registrant mothers who saw themselves as parenting alone. In addition to a safeguard for the child, this was also a legal protection of the father’s right to parent the child, should anything happen to the mother in the future. Chronic health difficulties during pregnancy, birth and recovery had highlighted this issue for some joint registrants.  

- **Ensuring (future) financial accountability.** This consideration was voiced most usually by joint-registrant mothers who were in stable cohabitant relationships with the father of the child. This consideration was for some an ‘unsaid’ part of their thinking. Thinking here involved the anticipation that the relationship could one day fail and that the presence of the father’s name on the birth certificate would help ensure he met his financial responsibilities whatever the circumstances of any relationship breakdown. Fathers also described financial responsibility as part of their wider set of responsibilities as a father and a reason to register jointly.

  ‘But at the time I think it would have, I felt it may have made him financially obliged to support her in the future…I don’t know if I would have said I want you to sign the birth certificate because if we split up I want you to pay for her. But I would have said I want you to sign the birth certificate because I want you to be her dad officially, blahblahblah, that sort of thing, because we are not married.’

  (Female, joint registrant, 41 years old, white)

Ensuring a father’s financial accountability was sometimes less of a concern for sole-registrant mothers who wanted the father’s involvement in their child’s life. This was because emotional involvement was given higher priority than financial contributions (where both were seen as lacking) and asking for money could be seen as potentially damaging to fragile contact and involvement. This is fully discussed in the section below. Mothers were also sometimes proud to be providing for the baby themselves and did not want to ‘need anything’ from the father of the child.

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11 One couple in the study compared the UK’s registration system to that of France, noting that in France a baby can be pre-registered or registered before birth, to clarify the father’s rights in case the mother dies during child-birth.
For women who had registered solely because the father had refused joint registration, other means were sometimes sought to ensure financial accountability. There was an awareness among some of these women that they could contact the Child Support Agency (CSA) and name the father of the child without his being on the birth certificate. This was underway or was a planned action in some cases. Previous experience of the CSA could undermine a woman’s confidence that payment would be assessed and/or collected. This lack of confidence was enough to keep some women from contacting the CSA about their youngest child at all.

Where sole registrant women were lone parents in receipt of Income Support (IS) there were reports of ‘the Social’ calling up and requesting the name of the father in order to seek maintenance payment from him. Women reported being threatened with the loss of half or all of their IS if they failed to comply. This was greeted with anger. Income Support recipients were often aware that they would receive a maximum of £5 in addition to their regular weekly income and were concerned to prioritise paternal involvement over money (particularly if it was precarious) or feared reprisal from their ex-partner. The ‘hassle’ seemed disproportionate for a financial return felt too small to make a meaningful difference to the child’s wellbeing.

- Reflecting paternal involvement. Beyond the concrete considerations of legal parental responsibilities and financial support was a more emotionally-based sense of the registration type reflecting the level of involvement and responsibilities assumed or planned by the father. The registration type reflected the parenting that was happening (or not) on the part of the birth parents. For longer-term cohabitant couples who had planned the pregnancy this reflection is largely why joint registration was seen as a ‘no-brainer’. It was a natural reflection of a jointly assumed parental involvement and responsibility. Fathers and mothers in these circumstances described joint registration type as being the obvious registration route – there had been no consideration whatsoever of sole registration.

“No, you just naturally do. I think, it’s all about the situation isn’t it? I could think of many situations where maybe someone wouldn’t want to but not for us.

Researcher: Why was it an obvious thing that your name would be down on the birth certificate as well?

Because I’m the father [laughs] so, and we were together. You know, we have been long term so...It’s no question really.’

(Male, joint registrant, 42 years old, white)
A ‘natural’ reflection was also the case for lone sole-registrant mothers, where fathers had had no contact with mother or baby since the discovery of the pregnancy. Women described how the father of their child had ‘no right’ to be on the birth certificate. This was based on his lack of acknowledgement of, and involvement with, the child. Where fathers’ involvement had been infrequent, unreliable or had diminished in the few weeks from birth to registration, women also felt this way. This feeling was particularly strong where the father was seen as having had a change of heart about being a parent during the pregnancy or since birth and had moved from supporting the pregnancy to instead ‘walking away’. Women in this position felt that fathers should not be entitled to the rights conferred by joint birth registration without assuming the responsibilities of fatherhood. What it was exactly that the father should have ‘no rights’ to was often vague and implied that being on the birth certificate was a privilege. This point of view was sometimes compounded by the (incorrect) assumption that naming a father on the birth certificate automatically gives the infant the father’s family name. In these cases women perceived the father’s lack of involvement (or even acknowledgement of the child) as likely to be enduring.

The relationship between rights and responsibilities was important in parents’ consideration of issues around paternal involvement. Thought was given, across the range of parenting circumstances, to balancing the rights given by being on the birth certificate with the level of responsibility assumed by the father.

- **‘Solidifying’ the paternal bond.** Joint registrant fathers described how their registration type could help confirm and solidify the bond they felt with their child. This was closely associated with giving the child the father’s surname. Fathers felt that this gave some solid or visible shape to their connection with their infant. This was also coupled with a sense of pride and having an ‘official document’ as proof of the father-child bond.

- **Promoting paternal involvement.** Where fathers were not living with mothers promoting the father’s involvement could be a key consideration on the part of the mother. This happened where there was involvement and contact between father and child but it was seen as precarious or tentative by the mother. Depending on the situation this consideration could either encourage joint or sole registration.

Women were inclined toward sole registration when they perceived money to be an issue for the father and understood that the CSA may follow up a father named on a birth certificate. Protecting a father from financial obligation was based on concerns that: the child’s father would feel his duty fulfilled in full by paying maintenance (and therefore, see less reason to visit the child or contribute in other ways); that potential disagreements about money may make visiting the child less appealing; or that if the father was angry with the mother about a request for money, the relationship between father and child would suffer.
Case example: promoting paternal involvement through sole registration

This woman and her boyfriend had been together for around two years at the time the pregnancy was discovered. It had not been a planned pregnancy (despite a lack of contraception use). She moved into a council-rented flat just after the child was born. Although things were difficult between her and her boyfriend during the pregnancy, they were still together at the time of the interview. He spent a lot of his time at her flat and she hoped he would move in within a few months and that they would become a ‘proper family’. She had chosen sole registration for the child, primarily because she did not want the CSA to pursue her partner. He was uncertain in his role as a father and this mother felt that if he was paying maintenance he would consider his duty fulfilled and would make less effort in other ways. (Female, sole registrant, 19 years old, white)

Suitability of the father to parent. Women who were not in cohabiting relationships sometimes felt there was cause to consider the suitability of the father to actively parent. Women considered previous behaviour in the relationship (especially where there had been violent incidents), the father’s behaviour with an older child, his reliability, consistency or attitude toward and about becoming a father. In some cases the man involved was already a parent with another woman and assessments were based on his involvement with those children. There were cases where women felt their child was ‘better off’ without the involvement of an unreliable father. Sole registration in these circumstances was linked to the registration type by the registration reflecting the lack of actual and desired paternal involvement.

5.1.3 The relationship between parents

The relationship between the two parents influenced the process of registration and registration type. The state of relationships influenced registration differently for joint and sole registrants. In sole registrations difficulties in the relationship between parents could play a role in the registration type. Conflict played a role where the decision making capacity of one parent was compromised by the other and in situations where choice was exercised but the registration type was not experienced as a decision. Joint registrations often reflected more harmonious relationships.

This is not to say, though, that where there was difficulty or conflict between parents there was automatically a sole registration and joint registrations had also occurred where conflict was described between parents. The influence of the relationship on the registration type was often more implicit than in other motivating factors. Parents discussed their feelings about, and relationship with, the other parent and described events or discussions relating to birth registration.
in this context. They did not always talk explicitly about their relationship as a motivating factor. Where explicit acknowledgements were made, the link was often described as visible only with hindsight.

- For parents living together and sharing responsibilities for a child, a joint registration could be seen as a statement of this equal parenting status. There was also a sense, amongst fathers, that the legal responsibilities conferred by joint registration gave them the same legal status that is given to the mother ‘automatically’ and ‘eens us up’.

- There were examples of joint registrants planning to marry or who had married since the birth registration had taken place. One couple were aware that they would need to register jointly once they were married and described the initial joint registration as ‘logical’. (He was surprised to learn that the couple would need to re-register the baby once they were married.)

- Differences in religious belief could create tensions between parents in their views of how a child should be named and raised. This difference was pointed to as part of the reason mothers had sometimes chosen a sole registration.

  ‘It was alright, but religion got in the way…It’s a conflict because he believes certain things and I believe certain things…Everything was fine [before] because when children aren’t involved in a relationship things are fine, but when children do get involved then it becomes difficult because you want to raise your child in your image and he might want to do it in his way, and that’s where the conflict comes in.’

  (Female, sole registrant, 22 years old, black Caribbean)

- In some sole registrations participants reported conflict between the two parents, particularly in cases where the mother and father were no longer a couple. The conflict was reported to centre around involvement with the child or the parents’ relationship. The period from birth until registration was described as particularly fraught. Mothers reported mismatches in expectations and the realities of the father’s involvement, and the initial weeks of the child’s life could be a particularly difficult period of negotiation as a result. In addition to caring for a new baby this was a demanding time and friction hindered communication. Conflicting views about the naming of the child could also contribute and in some cases ex-partners argued about the registration itself, even up until the day it took place. In these circumstances women sometimes went and ‘just did it’ (i.e. registered alone) in order to end heated discussions.

5.2 Interaction between categories of motivating factors

All three categories of motivating factors were usually in evidence for parents across registration type and parenting situations. Particular issues or considerations within a particular type of factor were sometimes particular to some parents’ particular situations (e.g. the right to search for an absent father only applying in cases where a father was absent). Where all three factors were evident, so were
different levels of influence of different factors or particular considerations within factors. Parental rights and responsibilities and the rights and identity of the child were considered the most important factors by sole and joint registrants alike. The rights and identity of the child were longer-term considerations and mainly related to a time when children were old enough to understand and have interest in such issues. The rights and responsibilities of parents and fathers in particular were considered in both the short and longer terms. Within this factor that the registration type reflected the current and expected future involvement of the child was particularly key for parents of both registration types. This was often a dominating influence on the registration type.

The essential difference in the interaction of factors for joint and solely registered parents was the extent to which conflict or tension existed between different factors. For joint registrants who were cohabiting and who saw their relationship as stable and had typically planned the pregnancy, little or no tension was experienced between factors; the three types of motivating factor pointed toward the same joint registration type. Joint registration was perceived by this group as without disadvantage and of benefit to both child, parents and a safeguard in the event of future family loss or separation. In these situations the rights and identity of the child spoke for joint registration which was also a natural reflection of the parenting status, conveyed legal benefits and safeguards and was seen as a statement of equality in parenting.

In more unusual cases less factors were present and this was associated with limited awareness about the functions and implications of birth registrations and a perception of the birth certificate as relatively insignificant. The factors that were absent or diminished with limited awareness were the rights and identity of the child (particularly in the longer term) and considerations around parental responsibilities beyond a reflection of current paternal involvement. This was not to say that the rights and identity of the child were unimportant but that no link was made between these and the birth certificate and the birth certificate was not seen as particularly significant.

‘[Who is on the birth certificate] doesn’t bother me. I haven’t needed it… well no, for my Child Benefit, just to send it off to prove that she’s here. That was it, that’s all I’ve used it for. So it’s been sat…in a file. Gathering dust.’

(Female, sole registrant, 23 years old, white)

Limited awareness of birth registration or seeing particular factors as fulfilled by means beyond the birth certificate removed any potential tension between different factors in these circumstances. For example, where a sole registrant argued that the father’s rights were negated by his lack of paternal involvement and that sole registration was a natural reflection of the paternal role assumed when the birth certificate was not seen as an important part of a child’s identity or rights, there was no conflict between perceptions of a child’s right in relation to their paternal identity and a father’s lack of right to be on the birth certificate.
Where parents were not cohabiting, had better awareness of birth registration or saw it as significant, there could be conflict between the different motivating factors. The following section explores this type of conflict.

### 5.2.1 Conflict between motivating factors

Unlike for cohabitant joint registrants, motivations about the rights and identity of the child for sole registrant lone parents could be in tension with considerations about paternal rights and responsibilities. This was also true of some joint registrants who no longer described themselves as in a relationship with the other parent. This tension could be further aggravated by conflict in the interactions between parents and, as noted earlier, the time from the birth to the registration could be a fraught period of parental negotiation. In other circumstances, there was a tension or a conflict created by the differing functions of birth registration. These, in turn created a tension between motivating factors. This was particularly true for lesbian parents who faced a specific set of issues. These are discussed in detail in Section 5.2.2.

Tension existed between motivations relating to the rights and identity of the child and paternal rights and responsibilities, particularly where there was a mismatch between the expected and perceived actual involvement of the father. Where paternal involvement was less than had been hoped for or was non-existent, balancing paternal rights with the responsibilities assumed, suggested sole registration was appropriate. Without assuming responsibilities the ‘right’ to be on the birth certificate was forfeit. The rights and identity of the child, however, often encouraged joint registration to be seen as the ideal.

Tension or conflict between these motivating factors was dealt with in a variety of ways. Women could give one type of factor or specific consideration priority and so the registration type was largely influenced by this. Another means of resolving tension was the fulfilment of competing rights by other means.

#### Decisions in favour of sole registration

Sole registrations were often made on the basis of prioritising the reflection of paternal involvement in the registration type. In these cases contact between the father and child was either non-existent, had diminished between birth and the registration or had been less than the mother had expected or hoped for. Women typically saw the level of contact at the time of registration as likely to endure and indeed, this had often (although not always) been the case in the months between the birth registration and the research interview. In these circumstances, thinking around the registration had largely reflected the father’s lack of rights to be on the certificate as a result of his absence. Where the identity of the father was known to the mother the child’s rights and identity were seen as possible to fulfil without a joint registration. Women explained that they would encourage a child to search for their father in the future, if they wished to do so, and would tell the child what they know about the father’s identity, activities and whereabouts.
They were often clear that they would tell their child about their father as soon as the child was old enough to understand. In this way, sole registrants often pointed to their ability to fulfil the rights of the child by other means.

Women also pointed to practical obstacles or appeared to make assumptions about the father’s lack of interest in co-registering as an explanation for the sole registration where tensions existed between factors. Here, motivating factors and the place of the participant on the choice and decision making spectrum were closely bound up. These tensions were sometimes why it was difficult to tell whether a sole registrant’s choice had been compromised or where choice was exercised but not experienced as a decision; the difference between a mother’s assumptions, her wishes and the father’s refusal to co-register was sometimes ambiguous.

**Case example: resolving tension between motivating factors**

This woman was with the baby’s father for three years. He had actively step-parented her older daughter and when she became pregnant she expected a continuation of his involvement both with her older child and his new baby. The pregnancy was unplanned. She felt that his feelings about becoming a father were initially positive but changed slowly during the pregnancy. He ‘just upped and left’ several days after the birth of his child and has had no contact with mother or child since. This mother felt that joint registration was the ideal registration type for the child but, in a circumstance like hers, where there was no paternal involvement she felt the father had little right to co-register. ‘I don’t see why…fathers should have their surname on the birth certificate if they don’t want to have the responsibility of bringing up a child and paying for that child’. The reflection of paternal involvement was the driving factor here: ‘if he doesn’t want to make the effort with his son, then why should I make the effort to put his name down on that bit of paper?’ (Female, sole registrant, 26 years old, white)

Where there was contact between infant and father, women could give priority to their concern to promote or improve paternal involvement. Mothers sometimes used a sole registration to protect the established or emerging contact between father and child. Mothers here aimed to protect the father from contact with the CSA as well as other requests for financial contributions in case doing so threatened the father and child contact.

**Decisions in favour of joint registration**

Where conflict existed between different motivating factors, decisions for a joint registration were based on giving priority to the rights of the child and a promotion of the paternal-infant relationship (where any existed). This could give way to a joint registration despite feeling that this was a less than accurate reflection of the responsibilities so far resumed by the father. He was not seen as fully having
the ‘right’ to be on the birth certificate but if the father had expressed a desire to be registered, particularly as a means of solidifying that bond, mothers prioritised the right of the child to know both parents. This occurred only in cases where the fathers were described as actively seeking inclusion on their child’s birth certificate. Women’s decision sought to actively promote a continued and improved father-child relationship.

5.2.2 Conflict between the functions of birth registration; specific issues experienced by lesbian parents

There were times when tension was driven by the multiple functions of the birth certificate. This was particularly the case where one parent of a child was a different person from the birth parent. Essentially, three adults are involved: the donor as a genetic parent whom children may want to trace when older (if they are not already known to them), the birth mother and the non-biological mother. Couples interviewed for this study had used donor-assisted conception on the basis that no further involvement was wanted from the donor in the care of the child. Birth mothers had planned to co-parent with their partner and she was viewed as a mother with joint and equal parenting responsibility for the child\(^{12}\). Value was attached to the right of the child to know their origin, genetic history and their right to search for their genetic father in the future. Value was also attached to reflecting the non-biological mother’s status as an equal and responsible parent and to her being afforded the same legal rights as fathers in heterosexual relationships.

Here, the multiple functions and therefore, motivating factors were in tension. The value gained in registering the (known) donor was to provide information about the genetic father and validate his place in the child’s identity. This would, though, give him legal parental rights which were inappropriate in the particular family circumstances and would give him the ‘privilege’ of rights when his lack of responsibilities was agreed prior to conception. This conflict meant that sole registration was more appropriate because it was inapt to deny the parenting status of the non-biological mother and convey legal rights on to the donor that were unwanted by all adults involved. The mothers, in this case, felt that had their donor’s co-registration been compulsory this could have dissuaded him from acting as donor because of the dissonance between his agreed role and the meaning of joint registration. Where artificial insemination was conducted via a clinic, this tension was removed because the father’s identity was protected from the mothers and so joint registration was not possible. That the child could themselves access information about the donor’s identity in the future fulfilled their rights to their identity by other means.

\(^{12}\) One lesbian mother had conceived another child before her current partner and she had started a relationship. This older child is co-parented by the biological father and the mother. The levels of involvement and co-parenting were discussed and agreed prior to conception. In this case the older child was jointly registered with her father.
For couples using both sperm donated through a clinic and in conception with a known donor, the fact that the non-biological mother is unable to be on the birth certificate was a difficulty that could be experienced as discrimination. This was because the non-biological mother lacked the legal parenting rights afforded by co-registering; an option not open to them. The non-biological mother was a day-to-day parent. She had assumed financial and social responsibility for the child and saw her commitment as life-long and therefore, was one of two parents of the child. Denying the non-biological mother the right to co-register was seen as a failure to recognise the responsibilities she has committed to and fails to give her the legal rights appropriate to her role and parenting status.

'I just feel “come on, we’ve got a much more varied social system than this”. You know lots of children are brought up in one parent households. It also does things like it says that bloke down the road who has been an absolute git and has done nothing useful in his child’s life gets to be on the birth certificate which says he’s the father and gets to have rights. And yet [partner’s name] who will do half the childcare, who’s absolutely [child’s] mother, been part of her conception…doesn’t get to be on it. It means… that we now have to go through a process to give [partner’s name] the rights that somebody on a birth certificate would have.’

(Female, sole registrant, 42 years old, white)

Lesbian couples had looked into the options available in order to secure legal parental rights for the non-biological mother in alternative ways. Adoption and seeking a Parental Responsibility Agreement were the options explored. The process of adoption was seen as long-winded and as an invasive and intrusive way to gain parental recognition for a child already the son or daughter of the non-biological mother. Parents felt adoption risked giving children the wrong message; that one mother is not ‘real’ and has to go through a process to be made so. The Parental Responsibility Agreement was understood to give the non-biological mother most of the rights conveyed by being on the birth certificate but not all. Having to seek rights that relate to social care and responsibility in other legal ways when those rights are given to parents in other situations without them taking any responsibility or having involvement, was a particular frustration for these parents. These mothers would have liked the non-biological parent to be able to register on the birth certificate and have equal access to the rights granted to other parents.

A suggestion to resolve the conflict in the different functions of birth registration and to help remove discrimination was to have space for three adults on the birth certificate: space for a donor or genetic parent (in order to fulfil the child’s rights to this information without conveying legal rights or responsibilities); a space for the birth parent raising the child; and space for the non-biological parent involved in the child’s upbringing and in assuming responsibility for them.
5.3 Chapter summary

The factors that motivated choices and decision making fell into three categories: the rights and identity of the child (or rather the child’s right in relation to their identity); parental rights and responsibilities and the relationship between parents. Considerations about parental rights and responsibilities largely focused on paternal rights and responsibilities. A mother’s presence on a birth certificate is automatic, whereas the decision about birth registration is whether the father is also registered or not. These factors were underpinned by a range of specific considerations and influences and sometimes varied according to parenting circumstances.

All three categories were evident in both types of registration. Where fewer factors informed the birth registration type, there was an association between this and more limited understanding about the process and purposes of birth registration. The rights and identity of the child and paternal rights and responsibilities were seen as the most important factors by both types of registrants. For cohabiting joint registrants, all three factors pointed strongly toward joint registration; there was no advantage to be had in sole registration.

Sole registrants (and joint registrants not cohabiting with the other parent) often experienced tension between factors. This was particularly where the rights and identity of the child spoke for a joint registration, yet considerations around the rights and responsibilities of the father suggested sole registration. A range of strategies was evident in the way such tensions were dealt with. These included prioritising one particular factor or specific consideration, seeking to fulfil the child’s rights in ways other than the birth certificate, or by using practical difficulties and assumptions about the father’s wishes to explain a sole registration.

Lesbian parents faced some specific issues. The involvement of three adults (the donor/birth father, birth mother and non-biological mother) meant that the various functions of the birth registration were perceived to be appropriate for one adult and unfair on another. There was particular frustration at the inability of the non-biological mother to be given the legal parental rights conferred by co-registration. The mismatch between the roles and responsibilities she played in the child’s life and the lack of legal recognition of this was experienced as discriminatory.
6 Conclusions and policy implications

6.1 The motivations and decisions of unmarried parents

The study suggests that the extent to which the decisions of unmarried parents about whether to opt for sole or joint birth registration involve making a fully informed and shared choice varies considerably. At one end of the spectrum there were sole registrant mothers for whom joint birth registration simply was not perceived as a real option. At the other end there were sole and joint registrants for whom either option was an informed choice, which included a decision making process.

Thus one experience of sole registration was that it had become the only, or the most likely, option because of circumstances which were manifest either prior to, during or after the pregnancy. These were sometimes apparently linked to the features of disadvantage that the quantitative analysis showed are typical of the sole registrant population. Making an informed and shared choice had been negated or compromised by circumstances, events and the choices and decisions made by the birth father. For example, paternity may have been denied or the father might have tried to force the mother to have a termination against her wishes.

A different experience of sole registration was that it was an informed choice exercised because it was considered to be the most appropriate option, particularly for the child. Lesbian mothers represented a distinct group of sole registrants in this study whose circumstances were quite different. (It is worth noting that we did not interview any lesbian mothers who had jointly registered the birth of their youngest child with the birth father). They had made an informed choice about conception and the involvement of the donor which had effectively negated choice in relation to birth registration.

The factors that motivated choices and decision making fell into three categories: the rights and identity of the child (or rather the child’s right in relation to their
identity); parental (largely paternal) rights and responsibilities and the relationship between parents. All three categories were evident in both sole and joint registration, but the extent to which these factors were present and the weight given to them varied between different groups of parents. The rights and identity of the child and paternal rights and responsibilities were seen as the most important factors by both types of registrants. Sole registrants (and joint registrants not cohabiting with the other parent) often experienced tension between factors, such as naming and paternal involvement. In contrast, joint registrants appeared more likely to have worked through any such tensions.

6.2 The circumstances and characteristics of unmarried parents making different choices

The quantitative analysis revealed that sole registrants were typically lone parents who faced high levels of social disadvantage. Low qualifications, social tenancy and the young age of the mother were particularly prominent factors. The other striking features were that mothers often appeared isolated and low proportions received antenatal care. As discussed below, the latter may be significant when considering interventions in relation to birth registration options. The quantitative analysis also pointed to most cohabitants registering jointly.

The qualitative research provided a more detailed understanding of the circumstances of unmarried parents making different choices. There are three especially noteworthy factors here: First, the nature of the relationship and communication between birth parents influences the birth registration type. A relationship breakdown or failure of communication were commonly associated with sole registration. Second, the extent to which pregnancy was planned varied across joint and sole registrants. Third, the sole registrant population included lesbian mothers who had made choices which negated the possibility of joint registration with the birth father (because he was perceived as a donor rather than a parent).\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) In January 2004 the Government announced a review of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. Its intention was to review and update current legislation, ensuring that it fits with recent developments and future directions in the field. This review has culminated in a Draft Bill put before a parliamentary committee for their consideration. This is the Human Tissue and Embryos (Draft) Bill published by the Department of Health in May 2007. A key area for consideration in the Bill is ‘Parenthood in cases of assisted reproduction’. Here, proposals are made to enable the non-biological mother in a lesbian couple to be regarded as a legal parent, from the point of conception. (http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsLegislation/DH_074718)
6.3 The role of official advice and guidance

The study points to the relative absence of official advice and guidance as a contributing factor to the informed choices of birth parents. Two factors appear to be particularly significant here. The first is the way in which official advice and guidance appears to be disseminated. In general it seemed to take place immediately after the birth, when birth parents, particularly mothers, were least able to absorb new information. Very few opportunities appear to have been taken to discuss the issues with birth parents prior to the registration appointment itself, by which time choices have effectively been made. The second significant factor is a consequential lack of understanding and awareness about birth registration referred to in Section 6.4.

6.4 Barriers and facilitators to joint registration

The study revealed a range of barriers and facilitators to joint registration. The quantitative analysis strongly suggested that social disadvantage is a barrier to joint registration. The qualitative evidence shed further light on this and points to a variety of specific barriers. Unsurprisingly these were commonly associated with the absence of the father at the point of registration. However, the circumstances which contributed to this absence varied from situations where his identity or whereabouts were unknown (in the case of identity this could be a deliberate choice), to situations which involved varying degrees of relationship and communication breakdown. These contributed to unresolved tensions about parental responsibility and the identity of the child. The other key barrier to joint registration was a lack of understanding or awareness of the process, function and significance of birth registration. This included misunderstandings about attendance at the event itself and the implications of options for financial and legal responsibilities.

The key facilitator to joint registration emerged as effective communication between birth parents which enabled tensions about parental responsibility and the identity of the child to be discussed and resolved. The overarching factor appeared to be paternal involvement, specifically, fathers taking responsibility on terms appropriate and acceptable to the birth mother. By implication the evidence points to the other key facilitator to joint registration being information and advice about the process, function and significance of birth registration. How this might be achieved is discussed below.

It is important to stress that for some participants sole registration was an informed choice, or in the case of lesbian parents, the consequence of deliberate and considered choices about conception and parenting. For some sole registrant mothers it was an informed choice based on what they considered to be the best interests of the child. It could also be seen as a lever to optimise paternal involvement which might otherwise be undermined by perceived interference on the part of the Child Support Agency (CSA).
6.5 Legislative and non-legislative measures to promote joint registration

Two key questions which policy makers will want to address is how to overcome these barriers and whether this can be achieved through legislative and/or non-legislative interventions. The recently published Green Paper includes both. It is worth noting here that where possible and appropriate, the depth interviews included discussion of participants’ views about compulsory joint registration. However, the primary focus of interviews was on an exploration of the experiences of participants and in some cases it was clear that such a line of questioning would be pointless or even offensive.

Where the question was asked, it elicited a range of responses which were not uniformly attached to either sole or joint registrants. First there was a view that compulsory joint registration may be desirable because it would facilitate greater parental involvement and enable clarity about the child’s identity. A more sceptical view was that it could promote financial responsibility but not emotional involvement. Second there was a view that it was simply not a practical option in certain circumstances, for example, where the father’s identity or whereabouts were unknown. A third view was that registration type should be the choice of parents, and in particular mothers, rather than imposed by government.

Drawing conclusions from these views about the value of legislative measures to promote joint birth registration is also complicated by the way in which participants responded to the question. Whilst reflecting on their own circumstances, they also speculated about the circumstances of others and to varying degrees this appeared to shape their views.

More generally, the study does point to the need for non-legislative measures to promote informed decision making. There is strong evidence that enhanced information, advice and support about birth registration will assist parents in making decisions which are in the best interest of the child. It underlines that when this is best targeted and by whom, varies considerably according to the circumstances of the birth parents and that a one size fits all approach to intervention will not work. Whilst it does point to the importance of early intervention (even before pregnancy), it also emphasises that for some parents the period after the birth is a crucial period when discussions around parental involvement may take place. Providing better information, advice and support at different times and via various agencies could help to ensure that a range of choices and decisions made by parents about issues, including financial and legal responsibility, are informed by a greater understanding of the implications of birth registration options.

Whether there is a role for a legislative approach alongside such non-legislative measures is far less clear. There are three points which need to be borne in mind here: First, there is evidence that for some mothers, sole registration is seen as being in the best interests of the child even where the fathers’ whereabouts are known. It may also be perceived as a means of actually promoting paternal involvement.
Second, legislative measures will inevitably involve intervention after the birth (as in the current Green Paper). The experiences of participants in this research suggests that this may be too late to have the desired impact because choices and decisions will have been made much earlier which have shaped parental responsibility. Third, it is clear that in some instances a legislative approach, even as a last resort, would not be practical. For these reasons in considering the policy implications of this study we have focused largely on non-legislative interventions.

6.6 Optimising informed choice about birth registration

This study shows that it is important to acknowledge that amongst sole registrants it cannot be assumed that unplanned pregnancy necessarily leads to a lack of paternal involvement or vice versa. Rather, parental roles are shaped in the context of possible separation and conflict and social disadvantage such as low qualifications or income. There are also other distinct groups amongst sole registrants, notably lesbian couples where pregnancy may be meticulously planned, the conception possibilities thought through and the relative parenting roles of involved adults discussed before the child’s birth (and often before conception). This suggests that any discussions about promoting the benefits of joint registration need to be mindful of circumstances where this may be less appropriate for specific populations or situations.

Participants’ experiences demonstrated that the relationship between paternal involvement and joint registration is complex and varies in relation to circumstances. The dominant issue influencing which birth registration option is taken appears to be the level and nature of paternal involvement up to the point of registration. However, even where fathers had been involved with the mother during the pregnancy and after the birth, the outcome is not necessarily joint registration, because of mothers’ perceptions about the level and nature of that involvement.

Because the qualitative data represents a snapshot taken shortly after the point of registration, this study does not provide evidence about whether joint registration facilitates greater and better paternal involvement, though the quantitative analysis does point to low levels of paternal involvement amongst sole registered births. However, it does suggest that joint registration has other benefits, including enabling the child to know who both birth parents are and ensuring that this information can be accessed independently of birth parents. It, therefore, provides a means of initiating a search for an absent father later in the child’s life.

Both sole and joint registrants who took part in this research were often clear that joint registration was the ‘ideal type’. There was evidence that some sole registrant mothers would have liked joint registration if circumstances in relation to the father had been different. This issue was markedly different for lesbian women where joint registration could confer unwanted, and what were perceived as legal, rights inappropriate for a person whose agreed responsibilities ended with conception.
6.7 Designing appropriate interventions

Whilst recognising that joint registration will not always be possible for some mothers or the preferred choice of others, it is nevertheless worth considering how it might be possible to ensure that birth parents are able to make an informed and shared choice about which birth registration option is best suited to their circumstances and to the interests of the child. The evidence from this study suggests that doing this would be likely to facilitate increased joint registration and greater clarity about when it is neither practical nor desirable.

A key issue here is to recognise that the actions and choices of parents that ultimately facilitate joint registration often occur significantly earlier than the period immediately after the birth of a child. The ability to make an informed choice may in fact depend on actions and choices made before conception and, in part, to much wider life circumstances. Sole registration is not irrevocable either, since joint registration may become more possible or desirable later.

Registering a child’s birth is one specific point in a trajectory of decisions, choices and varying levels of parental involvement that begins at conception and continues after registration. Immediately after the birth of a child some sole registrants have no choice, or at least perceive that they have no choice. This is driven by choices and decisions made previously and in some cases by social disadvantage. For joint registration to be a real option, a wide range of levers which influence paternal involvement along that trajectory need to be considered.

In considering the implications for policy presented by this study it is therefore helpful to use this trajectory as a framework for exploring the choices that are made that affect, or could affect, which birth registration option is taken. This provides a means of identifying the opportunities for intervention that might underpin policy development in relation to birth registration.

The quantitative analysis demonstrates that the trajectory needs to be considered in the context of wider life circumstances, chances and opportunities. If the levers to influence birth registration choices are also seen as levers to bring about less disadvantaged parenting situations and improve paternal involvement, it is imperative that birth registration is seen in the widest possible context and not as an isolated event.

6.8 The timing and nature of interventions

Table 6.1 illustrates that the trajectory consists of a series of key points at which various types of intervention by a range of agencies might be appropriate for parents. At different points interventions may take the form of information, advice or counselling by one agency or several in combination. These interventions are not mutually exclusive and multiple interventions may be required for some parents depending on their circumstances. A considerable degree of multi-agency working will be required to ensure that informed choice is optimised by all parents and a variety of challenges will need to be addressed at different stages.
### Table 6.1 Opportunities for intervention

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<td>Sexual health</td>
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<td>Reaching out to men as prospective fathers</td>
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<td>Sex education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discovery of pregnancy</td>
<td>Family planning</td>
<td>Information and advice</td>
<td>Identifying/reaching out to fathers</td>
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<td>GPs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Midwives</td>
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<tr>
<td>From pregnancy to birth</td>
<td>Antenatal care</td>
<td>Information, advice and counselling</td>
<td>Problem of mothers who don't access antenatal care/classes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Antenatal classes</td>
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<td>Midwives</td>
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<tr>
<td>From birth to registration</td>
<td>Midwives</td>
<td>Information, advice and counselling</td>
<td>Whether there is a role for the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (CMEC) during this period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Involving fathers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>GPs</td>
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<td>Children’s and families services</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CMEC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>Registrars</td>
<td>Counselling and information</td>
<td>Need for joining up services to support registrar function</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Children’s centres</td>
<td></td>
<td>Involving fathers</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Prior to conception – family planning and sexual practice

• Levels of ‘planning’ in pregnancy amongst study participants were variable. Sole registering lone mothers sometimes described pregnancy as a surprise and as being unplanned and yet there were contradictions between this and apparent sexual practice; i.e. choosing not to use contraception or the pregnancy with the child having been one of several pregnancies in a relatively short time period. This suggests that interventions need to focus on the reasons women want to have a family and the circumstances into which children might be born.

• The quantitative analysis pointed to the influence of culturally normative practices and the replication of women’s own experiences of parenting (the quantitative rates of daughters of lone parents who become lone parents are high). This provides an indication of the need to design interventions that focus on prospective parents’ (both mothers and fathers) conceptions of what are the best circumstances in which to seek to bring a child into the world.

Discovery of the pregnancy and negotiation of responsibilities

• Sole registrants in particular discussed difficult negotiations or decisions when the pregnancy was discovered. Some reported being given an ultimatum by the father of the child: abort or parent alone. This is a key area where the voices of non-registrant fathers need to be elicited and could be particularly useful and illuminating. Their absence from the sample means that this study presents just one side of these discussions. Birth mothers’ accounts suggest that pregnancy was sometimes unplanned and surprising to the birth father. The implication was that birth fathers may have felt ‘I didn’t sign up for this’, while the birth mother felt that ‘having done the act’ willingly (and without a condom, by inference, leaving her to be responsible for contraception) that he must be responsible for the consequences too.

• Views and opinions about abortion were important here. The option to terminate was a direct contradiction to strongly held beliefs for some women and not seen as a choice. Thus, the point at which an ultimatum about abortion is given by the birth father and the birth mother chooses not to terminate the pregnancy can be the point at which lone parenting in fact begins. The evidence shows that some birth fathers were unwilling to acknowledge child or their paternity from this point onward. Interventions may, therefore, need to include education about the relationship between sexual practice and the choices and responsibilities relating to abortion.

During pregnancy up until birth

• Antenatal care (where accessed) offers a forum in which the relationship between birth registration and issues relating to parenting responsibility and children’s identity and welfare, can be discussed. The evidence suggests that sole registrants may only consider the registration after the birth of the child and at that point may have that limited awareness about the processes (whether the presence of father is necessary) and functions (legal responsibilities, identity of child) involved.
• This implies that there are opportunities during pregnancy and as part of antenatal care to improve understanding and awareness, promote the significance of registration and allow time for consideration and discussion of the issues. This may in fact be the best time to address concerns and misperceptions given that during pregnancy, prospective mothers (and fathers) may have much more time and motivation to read and absorb information, rather than in the manic and exhausting period after birth. However, both quantitative and qualitative evidence here underlines the need to facilitate access to antenatal care in the first place before such interventions can be realisable for a core group of sole registrants.

• It was also during pregnancy that for some women the relationship with the child’s father fell apart. Pregnancy (including planned pregnancy) was described as a period of during which some birth fathers withdrew. Conflict at this point has an effect on the ease with which it is possible to negotiate expectations of paternal involvement in advance of the child’s arrival. It, thus, provides another opportunity for intervention to shape paternal involvement.

From birth to registration

• The birth itself and in particular the hospital, were the main point and location for receiving information about registration (if it had not been sought previously). Information is largely written which, as the quantitative analysis demonstrates, could be a barrier for some sole registrants. Participants in the qualitative study reported being given information in a pack containing information about a range of issues. The lack of significance attributed to, and limited awareness about, registration can be in part attributed to this aspect of ‘induced passivity’.

• Thus, there may be the potential here to provide information in a different format (e.g. in person as well as written) and to inform people about the process (using paternity form), functions and potential significance of birth registration. However, the extent to which this is practical needs to take account of resources and priorities on maternity wards and the ability and motivation of mothers to engage with the issues at this point. It should, therefore, not be seen as an alternative to providing information during the pregnancy as described above.

• The period immediately following the birth of a child was described as a period of adjustment in demands of caring for the new child (especially for first-time parents). For birth mothers it could involve hormonal changes, physical recovery for some and for others coping with the after-effects of complicated birth – e.g. emergency Caesarean section. It was also the period during which negotiations about initial paternal involvement took place if the birth parents were not a couple or cohabiting.
• There could be a perceived mismatch between maternal hopes and the reality of paternal involvement with the child after birth. This was the case sometimes where the birth parents had been a couple but had split up during pregnancy or (more unusually) in the first few days or weeks after birth. This inevitably had an impact on communication between birth parents. In such a situation sole registration could be a **reflection** of perceived lack of paternal involvement. There was an implicit sense that if the birth father had taken more initiative and interest, joint registration would have been considered. This is a particular point at which the absence of non-registrant fathers is notable.

• It was notable that during this period there was an absence of any official guidance or discussion about the registration process, including its purposes and significance. Possible opportunities for intervention are presented by the services women receive, e.g. midwife visits and health visitors (although women with asylum seeking status reported not having any home visits after the birth). This may present a more realistic opportunity for dialogue with the mother than the period in hospital immediately after the birth, though of course it may be too late to unravel the impact of previous misperceptions.

**The registration itself**

• It is striking that there is no ‘practice’ for birth registration. Parents arrive with limited or, in some case, no knowledge of what is about to take place. There is no rehearsal as with marriage, for example. This would appear to provide the basis for a variety of possible interventions including counselling, information or advice about the implications of birth registration advance of or alongside registration appointment itself. This could perhaps be achieved by a telephone conversation or by inviting people to come in and discuss it. Though there was some evidence that registrars assumed this role on the day, this was limited. Once at the registry office it is unlikely that the birth mother would leave without completing the registration process, particularly if the day itself or the journey had been difficult. The birth mother could feel vulnerable or overwhelmed by the practicalities of getting to the appointment.

**Joint registration at a later date**

• Given the fraught nature of the period from birth to registration and the possibility that sole registration is opted for as a reflection of the lack of paternal involvement, there is, of course, the potential that things could change at a later date. This experience had occurred within the qualitative sample. It is possible that there is subsequently more opportunity for reflection when birth parents may be further down the line from any initial difficulties experienced, for example in relation to separation or the mismatch between expectations and reality.

• There was sometimes an assumption that changes to registration were allowed during the first six months (when in fact it is 12 months). Arguably six months is insufficient time for perceptions to alter.
Exploring the opportunities for intervention along this trajectory thus reveals a myriad of parenting situations at different stages and a series of points at which services are delivered which could incorporate information and advice about the birth registration process. Such possibilities would of course benefit from further exploration and evaluation which would need to take account of issues not raised within this study, particularly those affecting non-registrant sole fathers (see Appendix A for further discussion of this). This study does, nevertheless, suggest that there are key points along the timeline from conception to birth and beyond where other decisions are taken that effectively drive the choice of birth registration type.
Appendix A
Methods appendix

This appendix gives further information about the research methods and approaches used in the study and includes copies of key study documents. The study was conducted between March and August of 2007. The General Registry Office (GRO) mail-out carried out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) took place in mid-April. Interviews took place from May until early July. Initial analysis began in June, with full analysis taking place during July and early August. The timeframe of the study was necessitated by policy requirements; findings from the research needed to be available while the issue of birth registration is considered by relevant parties across Government.

Sampling areas

London and Manchester were the selected cities for this exploratory research study. Previous analysis had shown higher than average rates of sole registration in London and the North West. Two urban areas were selected. This was because the timescale of the research: more research areas, and specifically research areas where populations are more scattered (as they are in rural areas) would have required more time for the fieldwork period than was available. This was compounded by the decision to retain the conduct of interviews among staff at senior researcher grade and above which placed further restrictions on the time period available.

Within Manchester and London, six postcode districts were selected from each. These were selected in order to provide a relatively wide range of advantaged and disadvantaged areas (according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2004) as well as a diversity in ethnicity amongst resident populations. Areas were also geographically clustered, where possible, in order to make fieldwork travel arrangements (between interviews) as efficient as possible.
Sampling parents

ONS wrote to parents who had registered the birth of a child within the last six months living in the selected postcode areas. These mail-outs were aimed at filling quotas set for birth registration type and whether joint registrants were living with the other parent or not at the time of registration. Anticipating the level of response, the opt-in would generate was difficult; it was hard to envisage how willing parents may be to discuss the subject area. It was of primary importance to be able to purposively select key criteria when approaching sample members. In order to achieve this we sought to achieve a larger sample frame of parents opting in than would be required for the study. Six hundred and thirty letters were sent out across the sample, around 14 times larger than the sought-for achieved sample to account for a potentially low opt-in rate and allow purposive sampling. The numbers of parents fulfilling the criteria were less than desired in the originally selected postcode areas. Four additional postcode areas were selected in each of Manchester and London in order to the sample-frame mail-out criteria.

A total of 86 replies were received to the opt-in (in addition to sample generated via other routes), which represents 13 per cent of parents opting in. Of those that opted in via the ONS route, 36 were interviewed. Interviews were arranged with four other people who replied to the ONS mail-out. These interviews did not take place – the four parents were not home at the arranged time. Where they were subsequently contactable a new interview time was arranged but again, participants were not at home at the second arranged appointment. Five participants were accessed via routes other than the ONS mail-out. One interview was conducted but not transcribed and not included; the participant’s command of English was insufficient for a depth interview.

Forty-two people who opted in via ONS were not recruited to take part in the research. Attempts were made to contact some, particularly fathers and mothers from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups. After up to five unsuccessful attempts to contact, researchers looked for other opt-in replies to approach. Of this 42, 36 parents opted in by returning completed forms. The profile of this group is shown below. The remaining six opt-in replies were received by telephone message or e-mail and screening information was not provided.
Table A.1  Sample: people who opted in but were not included in the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sole registered</th>
<th>Jointly registered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (as on opt-in form)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 years or younger</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30 years old</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 years +</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black African, black Caribbean, black British</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Asian British</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conduct of interviews

Interviews were conducted using a topic guide (see Appendix B), designed in collaboration with the Department. The guide is used to ensure similar sets of issues were explored in each interview. Interviewers were responsive to each parent’s experiences and views, probing issues that arose spontaneously as well as those on the guide. Given the range of circumstances and parenting situations particular topics were more or less suitable and relevant during different interviews. The topic guide is reproduced here. The guide does not contain pre-set questions but rather lists the key themes and sub-themes which were explored with each person. It does not include follow-up questions like ‘why’, ‘when’, ‘how’, etc. as researchers’ usual approach was to explore contributions fully throughout in order to understand how and why views, decisions and experiences have arose.

It was anticipated that interviews would be of varying lengths; there would be situations in which the parenting situation between both parents was straightforward, those where it was not, registrations where there was a difficult decision to be made and registrations where the alternative registration type was not considered. This was as anticipated – interviews ranged from under an hour to over two hours in length and this was largely driven by the relative complexity of the relationship between involved adults and the level of significance attributed and thought given to birth registration. Participants seemed to openly discuss a wide range of personal issues, with varying degrees of apparent comfort. Amongst parents for whom the birth registration was insignificant or for those who were focused on more dominant issues or vulnerabilities, there was a sense
that the research interview could suggest a previously non-attributed significance to registration. These parents asked questions about registration at the end of their interviews and were provided with contact details and website addresses for where to find answers to their questions. In addition, reflecting on the experience and decision making in something seen as ‘routine’ and done without much thought meant some interviews were more challenging.
Appendix B
Qualitative topic guide

Exploring birth registration decisions (among unmarried parents)

P6174 Topic Guide – parents

Interview aims

- Identify and examine in depth the motivations driving the decision of unmarried parents to jointly or solely register the birth of their child.
- Identify the barriers and facilitators to the joint registration of births for unmarried parents.
- Explore the role played, or not played, by official advice and guidance in decisions about birth registration.
- Map the characteristics and circumstances of unmarried parents making different choices about the registration of their child’s birth.

NB: text in italics within the guide denotes instruction to the researcher.

Introduction

- Introduce self, and NatCen. Explain independence from government.
- Introduce the study: about the circumstances of parents making different decisions about registration, about the motivations, decision making and things that help people make decisions they do.
• **Study background**: Funded by the DWP. Government are interested in encouraging joint registrations in the future, but need more information before making that decision so they understand the full range of issues involved for parents in different circumstances. The government especially appreciate that there may be strong reasons for choosing a sole registration and the study will help understanding around what types of circumstances these are.

• Reassure re **confidentiality and anonymity** – when the research is written up no individual can be identified – and the report pulls together the findings from all participants to this study.

• Explain that this is an **exploratory study**, that there are no wrong or right answers, we’re just interested in their opinion and experiences. We’re interviewing people in different situations as it’s important to hear a wide range of views.

• Explain that if they don’t want to answer a question at any point that they don’t need to, and they should let you know if they’d like to take a break during the interview, or stop at any point – their taking part is entirely **voluntary** throughout.

• Remind on **length** of interview – 1 to 1.5 hours.

• Introduce **tape recorder** and explain **transcription, data storage** and destruction (post publication of findings).

• Check if participant has any **questions** and if happy to participate.

1. **Background**
   • Household composition (inc. number and ages of children)
   • Daily activities of household members
   • Age of youngest child (how recently registered birth)
   • Any other adults involved in parenting/care of the child
   • Relationship with other (birth) parent (*brief*)
   • Main sources of family income – e.g. work, tax credits, benefit receipt, other
   • Local support networks – friends, family etc.
   • Housing tenure and length of residency at current address

2. **Recall, awareness and understanding on registration in relation to most recent birth registration**
   • What understood about birth registration
     – Who can register
     – How soon after birth
     – Purpose of registration
– Any requirements around registration
– Understanding of implications of different registration choices *e.g. what it means for each parents’ rights and duties or re the naming of the child*

• Source(s) of information about registration
  – (prompt if needed: hospital, home-visitor/mid wife, GP, other service, friends, previous births)

• Information supplied re joint and sole registration
  – Understanding of implications of each
  – Views on implications

• Views about information received:
  – Timing of when received information
  – Appropriateness of source
  – Appropriateness of information
  – Ease of understanding
  – Anything liked about way information was conveyed
  – Anything disliked about way information conveyed

3. **Experience of registration process**

• Significance/importance of registration to participant

• Where registered (hospital or registry office)
  – Views about setting
  – Ease of access in getting to place registered at
  – Barriers to attending registration

• When registered (how soon after birth)

• Views about experience of registration appointment/time with registrar
  – Interaction/relationship with registrar/staff member in hospital
  – Length of time taken in registration
  – Information asked for and listed in registration
  – Formality/informality of situation
  – Feelings at time

• For those with older children: comparison with previous experiences of registration
Joint registrants only:
- Attendance of both parents/later statutory declaration change
- Views and experiences of approach used

• Experience of completing form declaring paternity (requires application by father and acceptance from mother) (statutory declaration form W16)
- Ease of finding information about joint registration requirements
- Ease of acquiring form
- Difficulty in completing form
- Views about form
- Any help/support required

4. Involvement of other (birth) parent and other adults

Explain that are now moving on to ask about their relationship with the other birth parent and any other involved adults before asking in detail about the decision for registering together or alone. Explain that the reason for this is to help us understand how people’s experiences and decision making are related to the relationship with the other parent.

• Pregnancy
  - How planned or otherwise it was
  - Health during pregnancy
  - Support sought and received during pregnancy (including ante-natal care)

• Feelings about becoming a parent (again (where appropriate)
  - When discovered pregnancy
  - As birth approached
  - Since birth of child
  - How finding parenting since birth

• Sources of ‘official’ parenting/childcare support (e.g. relationship with midwife, health visitor, any parenting support involvement etc.)

• Sources of parenting/childcare support among family and friends

• Circumstances and relationship with the other birth parent at time of conception

• Circumstances and relationship with other parent since conception, including changes over time (ease of communication, joint decisions, making arrangements etc.)
• Finance (Parents no longer in relationship with each other and/or not cohabiting with other parent)
  – Contributions made by other parent inc level, regularity
  – How arrangement made (including re CSA)
  – When arrangements made (during pregnancy, since birth etc)
  – Views and feelings about financial involvement
  – Any impact/implications of registration type on financial involvement
• Residency or access (Parents no longer in relationship with each other and/or not cohabiting with other parent)
  – Time other parent spends with child
  – How arrangements made
  – When arrangements made (during pregnancy, since birth etc.)
  – Views and feelings about arrangements
  – Any impact/implications of registration type on custody/access
• Likely changes to other parent’s involvement in foreseeable future
• Ideal involvement of other (birth) parent
  – Financially
  – Custody/access
  – Reasons for wishes/differences between reality and ideal
  – Barriers to achieving ideal level of involvement from other (birth) parent
• Perception of other parents’ rights and responsibilities re the child
• Other involved adults/co-parents (non-biological parents)
  – Who – relationship to them and child
  – Role played – financially, in custody/access, childcare
  – How planned this was
  – Relationship between (non biological) co-parent and other (birth) parent
• Other sources of financial support

5. Decision making process and factors involved in registration choices (KEY SECTION – EXPLORE IN AS MUCH DETAIL AS POSSIBLE)
• Consideration given to decision re joint or sole registration
  – Extent to which felt like a decision
  – Level of thought put into decision
• Stage at which decision made about registration (e.g. prior to conception, during pregnancy, since birth)

• Information/advice received and others’ involvement in decision
  – Advice received/sought – sources, content, views
  – Who discussed decision with (family, friends, professionals)
  – Who involved in decision and level of ‘say’ of others (e.g. other (birth) parent, partner, own parents etc)

• What motivated decision process:
  (Prompt if needed): relationship with other parent, relationship with another adult, perceived suitability of other parent as a parent, behaviour of other parent, family’s views of other parent, sources of financial support, access/custody concerns, concerns around child maintenance, longer-term expectations)

• Key components in decision/ factors weighed up
  – Reasons for and against joint/sole registration
  – Range of factors involved in decision
  – (where appropriate) Priority/relative importance of different factors

• Reflections on decision and motivations
  – Satisfaction with decision/feelings about
  – Satisfaction with who involved in decision
  – Any regrets about decision made
  – Any changes in the factors involved and motivations since registration
  – Implications of any changes

• Perceived benefits of decision made
  – Currently
  – In future

• Drawbacks/disadvantages to decision made
  – Currently
  – In future

• If has older children: decision made in previous registrations
  – Reasons for any differences in decision

• Sole registrants only, and only where appropriate: barriers to joint registration

• Sole registrants only, and only where appropriate: understanding of any circumstances that could affect joint registration in future (e.g. paternal application for Parental Responsibility Order (PRO))
• Sole registrants only, and only where appropriate: likelihood of other (birth) parent seeking revision to registration/seeking PRO

• **SOLE REGISTRANTS ONLY**: (if appropriate) circumstances under which would have jointly registered/ what would need to be in place to have made joint registration

• **IF APPROPRIATE** – views on concept of compulsory joint registration
  – Advantages
  – Drawbacks
  – Any need for exceptions and/or safeguards

6. **Recommendations and future plans**

• Changes recommended to:
  – Information available about registration
  – How registration is undertaken
  – Processes for joint/sole registration
  – Implications for sole/joint registration

• If have other children in future what would do same/differently re registration

• Any other messages for DWP in relations to birth registrations decisions

**Thank participants for their time and thoughts.**

**Give £30 and get receipt signed.**

**Check if they have further questions.**

**Reassure re confidentiality and (if appropriate) give more information about reporting. Ask if would like to be told when the research findings become available OR a participant summary of findings (winter ‘07). If so take address/stable contact. Ensure you update database on your return to the office.**

**LEAVE INFORMATION CARD**
Appendix C
Analysis

The analytical ‘framework’ was built through familiarisation with primary data (transcripts and the conduct of interviews). The research team mapped the specific key topics and subtopics emerging from the data. A small range of transcripts were summarised using this map. These transcripts were deliberately selected to be diverse and amongst the more complex interviews conducted. The draft framework was piloted using this framework, reviewed on the basis of its fit to the transcripts and revised. All transcripts were summarised using this revised framework or list of issues.

The framework headings used in summary and analysis were:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>Relationships and involvement with other parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Relationship with other parent at time of conception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Household overview and background</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Relationship with &amp; views of other parent during pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Pregnancy – planning and views</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Involvement of other parent at &amp; since birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Health of mother and child and use of healthcare services (ante and post natal)</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Marriage – views and plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Experiences of parenting since birth</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Contact with &amp; whereabouts of other parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Other involved adults &amp; support networks</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Participant views about other parent's involvement and involvement wanted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Own experiences of paternal/parental involvement, identity re parents etc</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>General views on the role of fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Other dominant issues/ vulnerabilities</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Status of donor and any involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Plans for the future/outlook</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>Situation and involvement of/with older children('s fathers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>General understanding of and significance attached to birth registration</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Experiences of registrations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Awareness of need to register and sources of awareness</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Making the appointment and meeting the time restrictions – experiences and views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Understanding of options re joint and sole registration and sources of awareness</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Getting to the place where registered the birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Understanding and views of functions and purposes of registration</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Environment – experiences between getting to building and going into appointment with registrar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Significance of/importance of registration</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>The registration appointment itself – experiences and views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Views of information given re registration</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Any suggestions for change relating to appointment experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Extent to which experience met expectations and ideals</td>
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<th>Reflections on registration and broader views</th>
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<td>Reflections on registration type</td>
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<td>What thinking was about registration prior to birth</td>
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<td>Differences between previous and current registrations</td>
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<td>Thinking about registration from birth to registration</td>
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<td>View of who can register</td>
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<td>Extent to which it was/felt like a decision &amp; what did or didn’t constrain this</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Broader views re government involvement in parenting/relationships</td>
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Appendices – Analysis
Appendix D
Suggestions for further research

Little research exists in the UK in the area of birth registrations. While the current study was useful in identifying and illuminating decision making and motivational factors for some groups of parents, other types of parents or particular parenting situations were either not included or partially represented. Further research would be of benefit to policy makers in this area, offering a fuller understanding of the issues involved for parents in the most diverse of parenting circumstances. This section suggests particular populations or areas that would benefit from further research.

There was a marked difference in the levels of response between mothers and fathers. Fathers rarely responded to opt-in. Where jointly registering parents were living together, the opt-in form often gave the mother’s name as the primary contact. This in-built difference between genders in the level response led to less interviews being conducted with fathers than had been originally hoped for. Cohabiting jointly registered fathers were approached via their partner if they had not been the primary respondent on the opt-in form.

Jointly registered fathers who were not cohabiting with the mother of the child and non-registrant fathers were notably absent amongst the research sample. One group had not responded to the opt-in, the other (non-registrant fathers) were not an identifiable group we could approach for opt-in. Approaches were made to SureStarts and children’s centres advertising specific fathers projects amongst their activity programme within the selected SureStart areas. Two such projects were approached. One project was in the process of redesign and re-launch after participant numbers had dwindled. The other was based within a local mosque. Despite frequent calls to a named contact and messages left, the research team were unsuccessful in initiating contact with this project during the research timetable. In addition, screening questions were added to other Department for
Work and Pensions (DWP) research (carried out by GfK NOP) in an attempt to find fathers who had not registered on their child’s birth certificate who would be willing to take part. This approach was taken toward the end of GfK NOP’s recruitment period and was unsuccessful. It is possible that further persistence would have reaped success.

Fathers living at different addresses from co-registered mothers and non-registering fathers are relevant and important groups. They may be able to provide particular insights absent from the current research and would benefit from focused study where resources are available to identify and construct particular sample frames for these men. For the latter group specific and focused opt-in approaches via ONS could have more success in a focused father’s study. Men may see a focused study as more relevant to them and something in which participation is more appealing or in which they perceive their involvement would be of more value. To include non-registrant fathers and to boost a sample of non-cohabiting jointly registered fathers, a sample frame could be built via general public screening. This could take place in street-based locations or door-to-door in areas where families and children are known to live. Fathers’ groups could also be contacted and asked to approach their members with younger children about potential participation. This, it is likely, would reach fathers in particular situations or with particular views about fatherhood shared by a particular group. To avoid any in-built bias, future fathers’ research would be well advised to sample from multiple sources.

An alternative to this approach would be to sample fathers through mothers. This could be done in ‘case-study’ based research, where both a mother’s and a father’s views are sought, included and analysed together. This approach would offer the benefit of being able to examine what were sometimes ambiguous accounts or areas in women’s descriptions, looking at ‘both sides’ of each story. Female registrants could be identified via the national birth registrations records. An initial approach could mention the research’s focus on case-based research. Any responses received via opt-in would benefit from a screening stage where women are contacted and the involvement of their child’s father discussed. This is a sensitive area of people’s lives, particularly where they are not together, cohabiting or where the other parent feels disappointed with involvement with the child. It is, though, an approach that has been used successfully in other NatCen studies and specific tools have been employed to minimise the potential discomfort of participants. This has involved, for example, ensuring a separate researcher interviews each parent in a ‘case’ and so a situation is avoided where a researcher is already aware of ‘the other side’ to any story (See, for example, Bell et al., 200614).

Another area that would benefit from further investigation would be the relationship between the registration type and paternal involvement over time, in

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the longer-term. There was an emphasis on registration type being a ‘reflection’ of paternal involvement from birth to the registration point. This is a reflection of what is often a fraught and difficult period, particularly where parental roles or involvement is unclear or relationships between parents are changing. Research looking at the nature of parental involvement over time and the relationship to the registration type could be useful, in both qualitative and quantitative terms. The panel element of the MCS offers opportunities for longitudinal quantitative analysis.

Throughout the study’s findings same-sex parents experienced particular and specific issues relating to birth registration (in addition to the many elements of their views and experiences that occurred across the sample). That specific and particular issues exist for this group is of note. This research included a small sub-sample of lesbian mothers, all of whom had used sperm donation with the intention of the birth father having no involvement in the upbringing of the child. Amongst gay and lesbian parents there are a wide variety of parenting circumstances, differing involvement from birth parents and different routes to the child’s conception or how they came to be with their parents. Specific and focused research amongst the gay and lesbian community would enable a more inclusive examination of the issues relevant to, and facing, these parents.

Given the issues raised by lesbian mothers relating to sperm donation and birth certification it would be useful to carry out research amongst parents using a wider range of conception methods and fertility treatments. The inclusion of this group would enable issues around birth registration to be understood in their fullest; an understanding key to future policy decisions relating to the birth registrations system.


