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# Birth Component Pilot: Face-to-face fieldwork

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## Forward

Life Study was developed by the scientific leadership team together with experts from a wide range of disciplines drawn from the biomedical, clinical and social science research communities who formed part of a wider affiliated scientific network. It was designed to reflect the key research themes of the study, capitalise on the unique opportunities afforded, and to enable a wide range of research questions and policy issues relevant to children to be explored.

The design of Life Study, a new and multidisciplinary birth cohort for the UK, incorporated two integrated yet methodologically distinct components – the recruitment of pregnant women to the study in the second trimester of their pregnancy via hospital-based centres (the pregnancy component) and a national probability sample of babies at the corrected postnatal age of six months, identified from linked NHS/birth registration records held by the UK national statistical authorities (the birth component).

To progress the birth component, the research team at UCL tendered for fieldwork assistance. Ipsos MORI won this competitive tendering process and were duly appointed to undertake work associated with a pilot study for the birth component survey, collecting information from the mothers and fathers of babies, selected from birth registration records in England, Wales and Scotland to participate voluntarily in the study. Ipsos MORI worked closely with the Life Study team from the date of their appointment in December 2014 until December 2015.

Three reports from Ipsos MORI form part of the preparatory work undertaken for the Life Study birth component. This report focuses on the qualitative work with lone mothers<sup>1</sup>, exploring options for contacting non-resident fathers. Other reports describe design of the sample and the collaboration with the statistical authorities in this process of drawing a sample of mothers for participation in the pilot<sup>2</sup>, and the face-to-face fieldwork for the pilot, including interviewer briefing procedures<sup>3</sup>.

The pilot study and associated activities demonstrate emphatically that an ‘opt-in’ approach, whereby mothers are invited by the statistical authorities to participate before their names and addresses are released to the researchers, is no longer an option. The identification of an appropriate legal gateway for an ‘opt-out’ approach (the option to refuse to participate when approached by researchers) is now of paramount importance.

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<sup>1</sup> The report has been redacted to remove reference to location or other aspects which the editors judged might risk disclosure of participants given the small sample size included.

<sup>2</sup> <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1485698/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1485697/>

A second important feature of the pilot was that it tested a process through which birth registration records could be selected and linked to the equivalent NHS record, utilising information on prematurity to ensure interviews with mothers could take place when the child was at the same developmental age. But it is not just the sampling procedures that underpin the value of this work. A new technique for the integration of a database management system used for the construction of questionnaires with the scripting of questionnaires for use by interviewers, proved the accuracy and efficiency of this approach to the design and management of questionnaires. An experimental design to the contact made with potential participants showed how a more engaging design can enhance participation. The qualitative work reveals how important it is to gain the confidence of lone mothers when attempting to engage non-resident fathers with the study.

The Life Study Scientific Steering Committee (members listed below) is responsible for the birth component, having approved its final design and piloting.

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Members of the Expert Advisory Group on Fathers and Partners are listed below:

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Caroline Bryson  
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# Life Study: Qualitative work with lone mothers

Exploring options for contacting non-resident fathers

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [Grant numbers ES/J007501/1, ES/L002507/1, ES/L002353/1, ES/L012871/1, ES/N007549/1] and the Nuffield Foundation.

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# 1 Introduction

Life Study is a new cohort study designed to track the growth, development and health of over 80,000 babies as they grow up in the UK. Although the main participant will, initially, be the mother, Life Study also wants to involve fathers in the research. Many cohort studies to date have included interviews with fathers who live with their children but it is rare for studies to include non-resident fathers. Life Study is interested in assessing how best to include this group, both in a clinic setting (Pregnancy component) and in a household survey (Birth component). This report focuses on the Birth component.

Data from the first round of the Millennium Cohort Study, where mothers were interviewed when their baby was nine months old suggests that around 15% of the mothers were not living with the father of their baby at that point. Most of the non-resident fathers were in contact with the mother and baby (58% saw their baby three times a week or more and only 3% never saw their baby). Therefore, non-resident fathers appear to be playing an important role in the life of the mother and the baby and it would be useful to be able to gather their views on fatherhood.

Involving non-resident fathers in research is not straightforward. When a sample of babies is drawn, from any source, there is unlikely to be accurate information available as to whether or not the two parents live together. Therefore, as the mother is the main participant, it is not until this interview is carried out that we will have details about whether or not the father lives with the mother and baby. In cases where the father is non-resident, it makes sense for the mother to act as the “gatekeeper” to the father. However, it is important that by asking the mother for details of the father we do not alienate her (as we want the mother to continue to be a Life Study participant). As we will not know the circumstances around why the father is non-resident there is the potential to cause some awkwardness or distress by asking for information about the father, and we need to make sure that we limit this as much as possible. Therefore, we decided to carry out some exploratory, qualitative work with lone mothers to ask them how best we could approach them to ask about interviewing the father of their child.

There are various options for asking the mother about contacting the father and for the pilot survey (which was happening at the same time as this qualitative work) interviewers were given three possible approaches<sup>1</sup>:

- Option 1: The mother is asked to provide the contact details of the non-resident father to the interviewer so that the interviewer can approach the non-resident father directly, using an advance letter followed by a personal visit.
- Option 2: The mother is asked to pass on an invitation letter to take part in Life Study to the non-resident father. The non-resident father can then contact us to participate.
- Option 3: Some non-resident fathers visit the mother's household regularly to see their baby whether or not they are still in a relationship with the mother. Ideally the interview with the non-resident father would take place at such a visit. If the non-resident father is present at the time of the mother's interview, the interviewer is prompted to attempt an interview with

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to the pilot interviewer instructions for further details

him. If he is not, the interviewer tries to get the mother to agree to him being approached during a future visit.

The pilot survey had a small sample size (154) and there were only two mothers interviewed where the father was non-resident. (We provide details of what happened in these situations as part of Chapter 5). To supplement the pilot, we have carried out this qualitative piece of work where we spoke in depth to a small number of lone mothers to ask them about their relationship with the father of their baby, and to gauge their reactions to the three proposed approaches outlined above.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Sampling

When babies are born in England and Wales, their birth has to be registered within 42 days. The birth register has details of the baby's name and date of birth, as well as details of the mother. Most births are jointly registered, so that the father's details also appear, and fathers can be registered as living either at the same address as the mother or at a different address. Some births are sole registered, so that only the mother's details are on the birth registration form.

This means that the birth records are a useful sample frame for identifying mothers who are likely to be living apart from the father of their child (as these mothers will be either sole registrants or jointly registered at a different address to the father). We therefore worked with ONS (who hold the birth registration records) to send invitation letters out to a sample of (potentially) lone mothers with a young child (aged between four and 12 months at the time of sampling). This is a wider age range than is allowed for the first Life Study interview (when the baby will ideally be between five and seven months old). This was to increase the number of potentially eligible mothers that we could invite to participate.

ONS drew a sample of birth records using the following criteria:

- Babies who were born after 18 May 2014 and before 18 January 2015.
- Either sole registered or jointly registered at a different address to the father.

The sample was drawn from some postcodes within the following local authority areas (chosen as they had a relatively high number of eligible births):

- [REDACTED] (75 mothers sampled)
- [REDACTED] (75 mothers sampled)
- [REDACTED] (75 mothers sampled)
- [REDACTED] (75 mothers sampled)

These mothers were sent an invitation letter and a reply form that invited them to take part in some qualitative research, with the offer of £30 worth of high street shopping vouchers as a token of appreciation for those taking part. The letter is attached in Appendix 1. A reminder letter was sent to all mothers. The initial letter was sent out by ONS on 23 June 2015 and the reminder letter was sent out on 17 July.

In total, 28 mothers opted into the research and from this group we managed to interview 10 mothers. There were a number of challenges in engaging these mothers in the research, despite the fact that they had responded to the invitation:

- Four mothers had provided incorrect telephone numbers and so it was not possible to contact them to invite them to take part in the research.

- Four mothers broke the appointments we arranged and it was not possible to re-arrange an interview.
- Five mothers showed some interest during an initial conversation but were unwilling to commit to an appointment at that point and we were then not able to re-engage them in the research.
- Two mothers had challenging personal circumstances, for example, a recent bereavement, which meant that participation was not appropriate.

(There are three cases where we did not obtain an interview but the reason for this is not clear).

Having an opt-in rate of 9% (28 out of 300) is expected from an opt-in approach for qualitative work and is in line with other qualitative opt-in approaches. For example, the work by NatCen looking at "Sole and joint birth registration" which also used birth records managed a 13% opt-in rate.

## 2.2 Topic guide

The topic guide is attached in Appendix 1. This is not a structured interview, but is designed to provide a framework for discussion. The topic guide outlined key areas of topic coverage and included prompts and probes for researchers, rather than fully-formed questions. It was designed to be used flexibly, to allow researchers to be responsive to issues raised by participants. Responses to questions were probed fully and followed up with 'why' throughout.

The topic guide covered the current circumstances of the mother and her household; her current and past relationship with the father and the father's involvement with the child. The interviewer then explained more about Life Study to provide some context, and asked the mother for her views on the various ways an interviewer could ask to contact the father, her thoughts on how likely the father would be to take part, and what might encourage him to do so.

## 2.3 Fieldwork

Interviews took place between 16 July and 15 October 2015. By the time of the initial invitation letter being sent, the sampled babies would have been between five and 13 months. Given the interview dates, sampled babies would be between seven and 17 months at the time of the interview. The mothers interviewed had babies between 9 and 15 months.

The mothers interviewed lived in the following locations:

- Four in [REDACTED] (three face-to-face and one telephone)
- Three in [REDACTED] (all face-to-face)
- Three in [REDACTED] (one face-to-face and two telephone)

The telephone interviews tended to be shorter than the face-to-face interviews but there were no obvious differences in terms of the narratives or the findings between the two interview modes.

## 2.4 Interpretation of qualitative findings

Qualitative research approaches (including face-to-face depth interviews) are used to shed light on why people hold particular views, rather than how many people hold those views. Qualitative

research explores the contours of people's views, and what factors may shape or underlie them; it looks at the diversity of people's views as well as recognising that these views may not be resolute.

The results are intended to be illustrative rather than statistically reliable and, as such, do not permit statements to be made about the extent to which something is happening. Given the qualitative nature of the data collected from the depth interviews, this report aims to provide detailed and exploratory findings that give insight into the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of the mothers involved. It does not give statistical evidence from a representative sample.

It is not always possible in qualitative research to provide a precise (or useful) indication of the prevalence of a certain view, due to the relatively small number of participants generally involved (as compared with the larger respondent bases involved with quantitative studies). The value of qualitative work is to identify the issues which bear future investigation and thus different analysis techniques are used to identify how important an idea is.

Another consideration in the interpretation of qualitative data is the role of perceptions. Mothers' own perceptions of their situation and the behaviours and attitudes of the fathers of their children constitute the main evidence base for this study and it is important to bear this in mind when interpreting their responses. The methodology employed for this study where mothers were interviewed and asked to comment on the father of their children necessarily gives weight to their perceptions of reality; this is important to consider both because, as perceptions, they may not be factually accurate (we do not know definitively how the fathers would respond) and because they represent truth to the mothers who hold them.

### 3 Family circumstances

We interviewed lone mothers in a range of different family circumstances. Most had babies at the older end of the range (the babies were all aged between 12 and 15 months) and most were still at home, full-time looking after their child. A few were working part-time and one young mother who wanted to be a “good role model” for her child was doing a college course alongside part-time work (while her mother looked after her child). A couple of the mothers said that they would be looking for work in the near future.

**Table 1: Profile of mothers interviewed**

Mother's age	Child's age	How many children (ages in years)	Ever lived with the father	Household status	Working status
34	9 months	2 (13 and 1)	No	On own with children	NA
24	15 months	2 (2 and 1)	No	On own with children	Not working
28	15 months	1	No	With close friend	About to start own business
30	1 year old	3 (7, 5 and 1)	Yes	On own with children	Working part time
Early 20s	15 months	1	No	With her parents	Working part time
29	15 months	3 (9, 7 and 1)	Yes	On own with children	Not working
20s	15 months	1	Now living with father	With partner and child	Not working
20s	1 year old	1	Yes	On own with child	NA
Unknown (young)	15 months	1	No	On own with child	Working part time and college
23	1 year old	1	No	With her mother	Not working

Most of the women had never lived with the father of their child but three had previously lived together. One mother had not been living with the father of her child when she had responded to our invitation but they had since decided to move in together to “give it a go”.

Some of the mothers had older children as well as the baby and in most cases these children all shared the same father. One woman had a two-year-old as well as the 15-month-old and was expecting her third child, all with the same father. Another woman had two older children, aged nine and seven, who lived with their father, while the 15-month-old (who had the same father) lived

with her. A third woman had three children (aged seven, five and one) with the same father. The mother who now lived with the father of her child was pregnant with her second child at the time of the interview. One woman had a 13-year-old as well as her one-year-old but with different fathers.

Six of the mothers had no other children. Two of these were living on their own with their baby, one was now living with her partner and the baby, one was living with a close friend, one was living at home with her mother and father and one with her mother.

The mothers ranged in age from early 20s to early 30s and came from a range of backgrounds. One mother had spent time in a mother and baby unit and had recently been allocated a flat which she was slowly furnishing with help from charities such as [REDACTED]. Another mother had just completed her MA in [REDACTED] and was planning to set up her own online business. Some of the mothers lived near their families, and in these cases, their families often helped with childcare and support, while others lived a long way from their families.

## 4 Relationship with the father

Most of the mothers had a reasonable or good relationship with the father of their child. In one case the mother had decided to move in to a new flat with the father, which was working out well and she was now pregnant again.

A number of the other mothers also had very friendly relationships with the father of their child and had a lot of ongoing contact, from regular weekly visits to impromptu daily ones.

One mother who had three children with the father said that living together just “*didn't work*”. They tried to live together, but never really “*properly*” in that they still had their own houses. They then decided it was easier to live separately. They see each other three or four times a week and the father has a good relationship with his children, especially the older two, as the mother said he finds it easier to engage with children when they are a bit older.

Another mother, who is about to have her third child with the same father, also has a good, close relationship with the father. They have had an on/off relationship for many years and she was with him for four years before deciding to break up when she first became pregnant. However, they have remained good friends and he stays the night every now and then. She said that he provides financial support when he can and spends time with the children regularly. It is the latter that is most important to her; she wants him to spend time with his children because they see contact with their dad as something special. She feels that he has a very good relationship with both of his children even though he is the “good cop” while the mother says she is the “bad cop” as she has to tell the children off.

One couple lived together for six years but when their daughter was two weeks old, the mother decided that they would be better off living apart. She said that they argued constantly, “*some men just don't grow up*”, and that they are much better off as friends who live apart. They still see a lot of each other; he lives just down the road and visits on most days to see his daughter and to walk the dog. He does not provide any financial support, which was a major trigger for their break-up, but he helps look after his daughter so that the mother can do chores around the home or get out to the shops. She says it is a far better relationship than when they lived together.

The three youngest mothers, with their first babies, also had ongoing relationships with the fathers. One said that she and the father were not together and had never lived together but were on good terms and are “*becoming friends at the moment*”. She had known him a long time but being together was not good due to the arguing and fighting, and that it was “*far healthier to decide to go our separate ways*”. He comes round to see the baby regularly, when he is not at college, and she feels that she is gradually getting things on track after what she referred to as “*[messing] up her whole life*”.

Another young mother, who lived with her parents and her 15-month-old, also has a friendly relationship with the father. He takes his son to nursery on the days that she works and often sees him at other times, maybe four or five times a week. She has known him for years, since she was 13, and he provides financial support when he can and is also emotionally supportive; “*he understands how hard it can be with a baby*”. They have never lived together but she felt this was not something to rule out in the future.



The third young mother, living with her mother, also has a good relationship with the father. They had been together for four years but had separated after she became pregnant. They had both consciously decided to stay civil for the sake of their son and from the way that she spoke about him she seemed to genuinely like and respect him. He sees his son regularly, two to three times a week, for several hours at a time, and sometimes the child stays with him overnight. She said that he gets on well with his son who is always happy and excited to see his dad, "*he is a real daddy's boy*".

One mother had lived with the father (her husband) for many years, and had two children (now aged seven and nine). Around the time of the birth of her third child (now aged 15 months) she left her husband and they divorced. The two older children continue to live with their father while the youngest child lives with her. She still has contact with her older children as they stay with her every weekend (from Friday evening to Sunday evening) and for half of each school holiday. She says that she has a friendly relationship with the father, but that they live very separate lives. They see each other when the older children are being dropped off and picked up, but there is not much contact apart from this. He does not have much contact with his youngest child and his weekly visits centred around dropping off and collecting the older children, rather than seeing his youngest. He provides full financial support for her and the child but she expects to look for work when the baby is at school full-time.

In two cases, however, the relationship with the father is less friendly. For example, in one case, the mother last saw the father when she found out she was pregnant, almost two years ago. She was "*never really with him*" and she thinks that "*she shouldn't have got pregnant*". The father has no contact with the child either and has not expressed any interest in the child or her. At this point she does not want any contact with the father as it would be "*too little too late*". She seems to hold quite conflicting views about the father; on the one hand she describes him as a "*decent*" person but she is also very resentful that he had not been in contact for two years and was clearly hurt by this fact. She now says that she "*[does not] want anything to do with him*".

In another case, the mother explained that the father had "*abandoned*" her and her daughter. In fact, she said that he had not wanted her to keep the child and decided he wanted nothing to do with her. Since the child was born, the father had been in touch with her, but she felt that this was only in order to psychologically bully her and make sure that she did not tell anyone that he was the father of her child. The father has another "*ex*", with whom he has a child, and the mother has been in touch with her as she wants her daughter to meet her half sibling. He is also currently in a new relationship and has another child by this woman. It is *this* family that he wants kept in the dark. He refuses to pay any child maintenance and the mother is pursuing this. She has tried to contact the father as she wants her daughter to have a relationship with him but she said that he has been very unpleasant and she is now reluctant to contact him again due to feeling psychologically abused.

## 5 Making contact with the father

### 5.1 Option 1: Mother provides contact details for father

One option discussed with the mothers was that they could pass on the contact details for the father to the Life Study interviewer and the interviewer would then make contact with him directly to explain more about the research and see if he wanted to take part in an interview.

The most common reaction was this would be wrong or disrespectful and, for some, it raised questions about acting ethically. Nearly all the mothers who had a good relationship with the father felt particularly uncomfortable with this:

*"I wouldn't pass on his details because it is his details ... it doesn't feel right."*

*"He wouldn't like me giving his contact details to anyone he doesn't know".*

*"It is passing on confidential information without permission."*

In some cases, the mother felt that the father would not actually mind that much, because of the type of person he is, but they still felt that it was the wrong thing to do. In other cases, the mother felt that the father would actually be upset, irritated and potentially annoyed with them for doing this. Several mothers pointed out that they would be upset if someone handed over *their* details without asking them first and thus the same rule should apply for the father.

One of the mothers, who had lived with the father previously and still saw him regularly, initially felt that this would be fine:

*"Yes, I could do this. I don't think he would mind, either passing on details or taking part".*

But ultimately she concluded that this was only because he was such a laid back character and that if the shoe was on the other foot and he passed her details on she would feel slightly betrayed and uncomfortable. Therefore, she decided that she would not be happy with this option. Her point was more one of ethics than feasibility; she knew that her partner would not mind but it simply was not the 'right' thing to do and she extended this to other situations where the father may not as laid back as her partner and the idea of betraying their trust or over-stepping the mark might be more problematic.

Another mother, who absolutely would not hand over any contact details, wondered if some mothers, particularly those who could be more vulnerable, might feel pressured into giving a researcher the contact details as they may not want to say no. She felt strongly that it was up to the researchers to make sure that they acted in an ethical and responsible way, and that it should not be up to individuals to make this sort of decision.

The two mothers who did not have friendly relationships with the father had quite contrasting responses to this approach. One mother who had not seen the father for two years and did not actually have his contact details, said that if she did have them she would have no qualms about passing them on to an interviewer. Moreover, she felt strongly that he *should* take part in the research because it is about his child and he has a responsibility to do be involved.

The mother who felt she was subject to psychological abuse from the father, likewise said she would not have a problem with passing on contact details to the researcher directly. She felt that the father would perceive it as “a game” because this is the way that he treats all her attempts at contact. She thought that the father would probably “get mad” but she was not concerned about this as she saw it as a way to provoke some contact with him, which was ultimately better than nothing. She did not care if the father knew she had passed on his contact details as, in her view, “things can’t get any worse”.

These examples raise questions about the role that Life Study interviewers will play. If a mother's motivations for passing on contact details for the father are linked to her feelings of upset, hurt and anger towards him, this may place the interviewer in a difficult or potentially dangerous situation if they are then expected to go on and attempt contact. Furthermore, it is not appropriate or possible to ask interviewers to detect and deal with these motivations during the interview.

### 5.2 Option 2: Mother passes on information to father, and either gets agreement to pass on contact details or asks him to contact researcher

Where the mother had a good or reasonable relationship with the father, this option was seen as the most straightforward. Several mothers did not feel that the father would actually take part (as discussed later) but they did not feel it would be a problem to ask him about it:

*“I could do that but I know he would say no”.*

The mothers felt that this approach allowed them to have some control, for example one mother wanted to be able to “reassure him that she didn’t have a hidden agenda”. It also gave the father control; he could decide if he wanted to get in touch himself, have his details passed on, or have absolutely nothing to do with it. None of the mothers with a good relationship thought that asking the father would cause any problems between them, and they felt far more comfortable with this approach than with Option 1.

Both mothers with unfriendly relationships with the father saw this option as far less practical or attractive. The mother who had no contact details for the father felt that she would be willing to get in touch with him about this if she could. This was despite saying earlier that she “[does not] want anything to do with him” and illustrates how complex her current feelings about him are. She implied that it would give her a chance to get in touch with him and make him speak to her. The other mother said she would refuse to contact the father herself as she would not want to put herself through the potential stress and psychological abuse that her other contact attempts have caused. For this reason she would rather the interviewer made the direct contact.

### 5.3 Option 3: Mother arranges for the interviewer to visit her home when the father will be there so that the interviewer can ask the father to take part

Most of the mothers with friendly relationships also felt that this option would be possible. Some mothers specifically mentioned that they would want to be able to talk to the father first, rather than just having the interviewer there when he turns up. One mother said that she felt that the sudden presence of the interviewer could make the father feel pressurised to take part even if he did not really want to.

A few mothers felt that this was the best approach as it meant that the father would have more of a chance to ask questions to “*find out what it was all about*” and “*be reassured*” about the research. One mother felt that it would be better for the father to be interviewed at her home as his flat was “*minging*” and he might not want anyone to see it. Importantly, she felt that this might act as a barrier preventing him from responding positively to an interviewer if contacted directly.

One mother who was living with her parents did not like this idea at all, as she felt that it would be an uncomfortable situation for both the father and her if he was interviewed about his child in her family home. She felt that he would be unhappy about it and that she would find it “*really awkward*”.

This approach was clearly not suitable or practical for the two mothers who had no friendly contact with the fathers.

#### 5.4 Findings from the quantitative pilot

As discussed in Chapter 1, alongside the qualitative work we were also conducting a small quantitative pilot to test the questionnaire and processes for the main Life Study six-month interview. This pilot involved sending interviewers out to approach 154 mothers, across six areas, who had opted-in to the Life Study (from birth records).

As we outlined in Chapter 1, interviewers for the pilot had been given a range of possible approaches for situations where there was a non-resident father and were instructed to try to obtain an interview with the non-resident father if possible.

During the fieldwork for this pilot, two mothers were interviewed who were not living with the father of their baby. In both cases, the interviewer did attempt to obtain contact details for the non-resident father. The outcome in both cases chimed with the findings from the qualitative work,

One single mother had been living with her parents but had just moved out to her own place (the interviewer visited the parental address as that was the address provided at opt-in). The participant's father provided a new address for his daughter and grandchild, and also told the interviewer that the father was not very involved. At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked the mother if she would be willing to provide contact details for the father. The participant said that the father would not do it and that she did not have any contact details for him. The interviewer therefore left an opt-in form with the mother to pass onto the father when she next saw him. The interviewer phoned the participant later to see if she had been able to arrange an interview for the father. The mother said that she had spoken to the father but that he was not interested in taking part.

The other single mother had two children with same father (one aged 12 years and the other seven months). She said that the father would not do the interview and was adamant about this. She refused to pass on any of his contact details to the interviewer.

Therefore, the pilot did not achieve any interviews with non-resident fathers. The pilot report provides more information about the outcomes for all of the single mothers identified at opt-in. Nine of the 156 mothers issued to interviewers said that they were not living with a partner at the time of opt-in, but only two single mothers were identified by the interviewers. In the pilot report we explore the outcomes for the other seven.

## 6 Engaging fathers

Successfully contacting fathers does not automatically mean successfully engaging them in Life Study. We did not speak directly to any fathers as part of this research, and so our only understanding of how easy or difficult it would be to engage fathers was from the mother's perspective.

Several mothers with friendly relationships with the father of their child felt that it was highly unlikely that he would take part in any interview. They also struggled to think of anything that would persuade the father to take part. Some mentioned using incentives (and they themselves were getting £30 shopping vouchers for taking part in the interview) but were not sure that even an incentive would make any difference. They just felt that the fathers would be unwilling to engage with a survey, often because of their personality:

*"No way he would ever do it. He is a very private person and doesn't like talking about himself".*

*"He's a himself man .....He doesn't like talking to strangers about his life".*

*"He just wouldn't be interested".*

*"He's a bit suspicious".*

Others were more ambivalent about whether or not the father would take part. One felt that the father would need "a lot of information" before deciding, but ultimately thought that he would probably veer towards not taking part as he was simply a "closed person". Some said they just really did not know if the father would be interested in taking part. They saw it as his decision and did not feel they were in a position to predict his response. Typical of this kind of ambivalent position were responses such as:

*"You could offer vouchers, but there would be no guarantee".*

*"[I] really don't know if he will be interested but I would be happy to ask".*

Several saw value in their role as an intermediary able to explain the background and reassure fathers about the aims of the study and the significance of their participation.

Only one mother felt confident that the father would probably take part. She did not feel he would need an incentive but rather that he would be interested to take part for nothing.

Overall, the mothers had fairly limited ideas about what might engage the fathers and encourage their participation. One mother felt that fathers may be interested to take part on hearing that the research was about *their* child. Yet others felt that this did little to outweigh concerns about data privacy or general uneasiness about discussing personal matters with a stranger. One mother felt that men were generally more nervous about information security and sharing information than women were, and that perhaps men tended to be more wary of this kind of interaction. Another said she thought it would vary case by case and be very dependent on the personality of the father:

*"Every situation is different, some fathers are friendly and open and others are closed".*



## 7 Issues for further discussion

While this is a small scale piece of research involving a small number of mothers, there is much consistency in the responses of the mothers who are in contact with the fathers of their children. The responses of the two mothers who are not in contact with the fathers also provide a good indication of some of the potential risks around the involvement of non-resident fathers, both to mothers, interviewers and to the overall integrity of the research study itself. Therefore, we feel that this research has provided useful insight into accessing non-resident fathers.

This small piece of qualitative work suggests that in many cases, where there is an ongoing, friendly relationship between the mother and father, it would be perfectly feasible to try to invite the father to take part in an interview, and that in some, if not all, cases the father would take part. The research also suggests that some ways of contacting the father are better than others and we discuss this below.

Where the relationship is not friendly, trying to interview the father is far less straightforward.

We discuss some of the issues raised by the research below, with our recommendations as to possible ways forward.

### **Issue 1: Reconsider the option of asking the mother directly for the father's contact details**

Mothers in contact with the father were almost unanimously against the idea of handing over his contact details without checking with him first. Even one mother whose immediate thought was that this would be fine had some second thoughts about this when she considered the implications in more detail.

One of the mothers who was not in contact with the father was more than happy to hand over his contact details, but almost as an act of provocation. This could potentially create a harmful situation: for the mother if the father reacted angrily and for the interviewer who could find themselves involved in private relationship disputes.

Methodologically, this approach has the benefit of potentially leading to a better response among fathers than allowing them to "opt in" via the mothers. It would also enable potential contact with fathers who have less contact with the mother of their child (where the mother is unable or unwilling to pass on the survey information). However, if very few mothers are willing to pass on contact details without consent, this reduces the effectiveness of this approach. In addition, this approach also has the potential to cause harm where details are provided without consent.

We would strongly advise against using this approach due to the potential risks and the harm that it may cause.

### **Issue 2: How best to approach mothers to engage non-resident fathers in the research**

#### a) Mothers on friendly terms with the father

The other two options are less problematic and give an element of control to both the mother and the father. Where there is friendly contact between the mother and father, there seems to be little

problem in asking the mother to pass on information about the survey to the father and discuss it with him. However, if information is passed on, and the father is then left to opt-in if he is interested, it is likely that there will be a low take up.

In order to try to increase the likelihood of the father taking part, ideally the mother would take on a more active role and would try to arrange a suitable interview time for the father, preferably at her home. The interviewer could suggest that s/he will re-contact the mother to see whether the father is interested, and whether it is possible to arrange a suitable time to visit so that s/he can meet the father, explain more and potentially do the interview. The interviewer can be flexible about the actual location of the interview, making it clear that this is wherever works best for both the mother and father.

In some cases, the father may agree to have his contact details passed onto the interviewer who can then contact the father directly. In other cases, the mother will act as the "go-between". Of course, if the father is not interested, the mother can let the interviewer know this and no further contact with the father will be attempted.

Using the mother as a survey "advocate" could help with response. As one mother explained, leaving the decision solely in the hands of the father of her child would, in reality, make the interview hard to arrange. By contrast, she was quite confident that if it was left to her to speak to him and to arrange a suitable time when she knew he would be round at her flat, then it would be much more likely to work.

#### b) Mothers not on friendly terms with the father

Where the mother and father are on less friendly terms, the above approach still has some risks. A mother we spoke to had no contact details for the father and so would be unable to pass on this information. However, she said that if she did have his details she would contact him (but mainly as a way for her to provoke some contact). This could cause problems (for example, if the information was sent to a father who is living with another partner who may not know about his child) and could provoke anger or irritation.

The interviewer will have no way to make a judgement about the motives of the mother in saying she will pass on information as the interviewer has no knowledge of what the relationship is like. Potentially, the materials that are passed on could be designed to be vague, to avoid alerting anyone that the research is about an existing child. However, this would be difficult to do in practice as they would have to be extremely vague which would appear odd to fathers who are on friendly terms with the mother and have contact with their child, as well as not providing the level of information needed for informed consent.

One possible option is that where the mother has, in the self-completion element of the questionnaire, recorded that her relationship with the father is "very unfriendly" we do not attempt to make any contact with the non-resident father. This would reduce the number of situations which are likely to be higher risk.

## 7.1 Conclusions

We know that trying to involve non-resident fathers in research such as this is difficult. The Millennium Cohort Study piloted the inclusion of non-resident fathers at Wave 3 but concluded that response



was likely to be low and that the sample of non-resident fathers would be unrepresentative and so did not pursue this option<sup>2</sup>.

This small piece of qualitative work suggests that in many cases, where there is an ongoing, friendly relationship between the mother and father, it would be perfectly feasible to try to invite the father to take part in an interview, and that in some, if not all, cases the father would take part. It does not allow us to get a feel for what the response rate among non-resident fathers would be but further piloting would allow us to assess that with more accuracy.

However, this work does suggest that the fathers who we do manage to contact and interview would tend to be fathers where there is a friendly relationship with the mother and some ongoing contact with the child. While we have evidence from the first wave of Millennium Cohort Survey that this is the most common situation for non-resident fathers when the babies are very young, it is not the only situation. The non-resident fathers who are included in Life Study will almost certainly under-represent those who have very little or no contact with their child or who have a difficult relationship with the mother. This does not mean that non-resident fathers should not be included at all, but that the research will need to caveat any findings and take this into account when discussing any results.

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<sup>2</sup> MCS3 – Technical Report on Fieldwork. CLS.  
<http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?&sitesectionid=885&sitesectiontitle=Technical+reports>

# Appendix 1 Materials

## Recruitment letter

This letter was on headed paper (Life Study and ONS).

Dear <<FIRST NAME AND SURNAME OF MOTHER>>,

### **Invitation to take part in a study about motherhood and relationships**

You're invited to take part in this research, which is part of an important new study of babies and families called Life Study, being run by researchers at University College London in partnership with Ipsos MORI, an independent research organisation.

As part of this research, we would like to talk to mothers who have recently had a baby, but do not live with the father of that child. We are contacting you because you have registered the birth of your baby on your own or with different addresses for you and the father.

We would like to talk to you about your relationship with the father of your baby. This will help us understand how to approach fathers who may not live with their babies to offer them a chance to take part in Life Study. We would like to talk about how much contact he has with you and your baby.

We'd like to talk to you for about 30-45 minutes, and to thank you for taking part we will give you a £30 shopping voucher. We would be happy to visit you, or if you would prefer, we can talk over the phone. Please be assured that any information you give as part of this study will be treated as confidential.

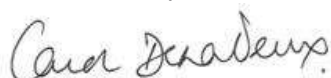
If you would be interested in taking part, or finding out more, please return the enclosed sheet with your details and we will get in touch. Alternatively, please phone Jasmin Keeble on 020 7347 3391 between 9am and 6pm and we can answer your questions, and discuss whether you would like to take part in an interview.

If you are not a single parent, I apologise for bothering you. Please let us know by marking "NO more contact" on the enclosed sheet and we will not contact you again.

If for any reason your baby is no longer with you, please also mark 'NO more contact' on the enclosed sheet and return it so we are aware not to contact you again. We know that these invitations may sometimes arrive at difficult times in people's lives: if this is the case for you, please accept our sincere apologies.

We do hope you will consider taking part in this important research and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,



Professor Carol Dezateux  
Life Study Scientific Director, University College London

## Topic guide

## Study of motherhood and relationships

### Topic guide

#### Background and context

The role of fathers in a child's life is known to be important, and Life Study will help to build the evidence base around this, by including fathers in the research wherever possible. Mothers will need to act as gatekeepers for non-resident partners, and so it is important that we work with mothers to find out the best way, and most ethical way to ask for father's contact details.

*This qualitative work is the first step in exploring how best to contact non-resident fathers. We will be interviewing 15-20 mothers (where the father lives in a different household).*

#### Aims and objectives

The specific aims and objectives are to:

- Map different types of relationships mothers have with non-resident fathers (and implications this might have on contact)
- Explore different options of getting in touch with non-resident fathers (how each would make them feel/pros and cons)
- Exploring possibility of participants passing on contact details of non-resident fathers

#### Use of the guide

The guide outlines key areas of topic coverage and includes prompts and probes for researchers rather than fully-formed questions. The guide is designed to be used flexibly and to allow moderators to be responsive to issues raised by participants. Responses to questions will be probed fully, with moderators following up responses with 'why' throughout.

## 1. Introduction and background

5 minutes

Section aim: To introduce the research and explain purpose. Emphasise voluntary nature and give participants an opportunity to ask questions.

- Introduce self – researcher from an organisation called Ipsos MORI.
- Explain that Ipsos MORI is independent and working with researchers at UCL.
- About the research - Brief overview of Life Study and purpose of interview (but explain this will be discussed in more detail later).
  - Will build a picture of UK babies and their parents from pregnancy through the very early years and as they grow up, by following the lives of 80,000 babies.
  - Interested in speaking to mothers and fathers as part of this study.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We'd like to speak to you about different ways we might get in touch with fathers who live in a different household in theory (but won't be doing this today).</li> <li><b>Voluntary nature:</b> Remind that participation is voluntary. You can decide to not take part at any point, or you can chose to not answer any questions if you would prefer not to. <i><u>They should not feel under any pressure to give us any details or information you would prefer not to.</u></i></li> <li>There are no right or wrong answers; we are just interested in your views. It is fine if you do not have a strong view about something.</li> <li><b>Confidentiality/anonymity:</b> Everything you tell us will be treated confidentially – the only exception to this is if you tell us about something that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Makes us worried that you or someone else is at risk of serious immediate harm.</li> </ul> <p>With your permission we will audio-record the discussion, to ensure we have an accurate record of what is discussed. Only the research team will have access to this.</p> </li> <li><b>Timings:</b> Reiterate start and end times.</li> <li>Incentives: We will provide this after the interview (or post if tele-depth).</li> <li>Check to see if any questions and happy to be recorded.</li> </ul> <p>START RECORDING</p>
<b>2. Family circumstances</b>	
5 minutes	<p><i><u>Section aim: Gather some background information about the mother and child, family circumstances, and lead in to discussions about the father.</u></i></p> <p><b>Background and context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participant introduction: what they do day-to-day and overview of circumstances (<i>to provide researcher with context/sense of the bigger picture</i>)</li> </ul> <p><b>Overview of circumstances</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Household (how long lived in present accommodation/who else lives in the household)</li> <li>Childcare responsibilities - Age, name, gender of baby/Any other children (explore gender/ages)</li> <li>Explore who takes care of child/children during the day (if not participant).</li> </ul> <p><i>Researcher note – explain the focus of the interview will be on child born in XX.</i></p>
<b>3. Introducing the survey</b>	
5 minutes	<p><i><u>Section aim: Explain a bit about the Life Study survey and our interest in including fathers who do not live with their babies.</u></i></p> <p><b>Overview of Life Study</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Life Study is designed to:</li> <li>Build a picture of babies and parents from pregnancy through early years.</li> <li>800,000 babies.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect information about children’s health and well-being/families.</li> <li>• Support research to give children best possible start in life.</li> <li>• Run by UCL and Ipsos MORI.</li> </ul> <p><b>Purpose of interview</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain that we are interested in speaking to fathers who live in a different household to mothers – and would like to speak to them about the best way of doing this.</li> </ul> <p><i>Researcher note – if appropriate/necessary, gently reiterate that they do not have to answer any questions if they would prefer not to.</i></p>
<b>4. Relationship with the father</b>	
5 -10 minutes	<p><u>Section Aim: To understand the relationship she the mother has with the father of the baby.</u></p> <p><b>Participant’s relationship with the father</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore relationship with father <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Friendly/unfriendly</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How much contact they have</li> <li>• Length of time known father</li> <li>• Whether used to live together (if so, length of time lived apart)</li> </ul> <p><b>Child’s relationship with the father</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore child’s relationship with their known father</li> <li>• Whether child know their father</li> <li>• How much contact the child has with their father</li> <li>• Nature of relationship (financial/emotionally supportive)</li> </ul>
<b>5. Asking for contact details/How to ask for contact details</b>	
10-15 minutes	<p><u>Section aim: Explore with mothers how the father contact details could be asked for, what they think would work and why.</u></p> <p><b>*Exploring different approaches to contact* PRIORITY AREA</b></p> <p>Ask participant to imagine they had been asked to XXXX (select option as appropriate).</p> <p>In relation to each option explored, probe fully around:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Initial response to option</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>would they do it</i></li> <li>- <i>specific reservations</i></li> <li>- <i>any negative impacts on consequent engagement with the study</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Carrying out option</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How easy/difficult it would be</li> <li>- Specific barriers (practical – not having contact details, social/emotional – nature of relationship with father)</li> <li>- How they would feel doing it</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>What are the possible implications</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- their relationship with the father</li> <li>- the child’s contact/relationship with the father</li> <li>- other implications</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>*OPTION ONE: If in less contact*</b></p> <p><i>Provide the father’s contact details to researchers – without obtaining the father’s consent first</i></p> <p><b>OPTION TWO: If in regular contact</b></p> <p><i>The mother asks the father’s permission to pass on contact details to researchers</i></p> <p><b>OPTION THREE: At interview</b></p> <p><i>Explain that when we interview mothers later on, as part of the Life Study, interviewers might visit the mother’s household (rather than invite them to an external venue). If this was the case –</i></p> <p><i>Could an interview be set up with the father if he visits during the mother’s interview</i></p> <p><b>Compare and contrast</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the relative pros and cons of each approach</li> <li>• How do they think other people might respond (explore factors that might make other methods preferred).</li> </ul> <p><b>Likelihood of father taking part</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore perceived likelihood of fathers taking part</li> <li>• Probe on factors that would make them</li> <li>• More likely to take part (financial incentive/’being a part’ of the study)</li> <li>• Less likely to take part (time constraints/unable to see the point)</li> </ul>
<b>6. Conclusion and close</b>	
2 minutes	<p><u><i>Section aim: To wind down, indicate the close of the interview and leave participants in a neutral mood.</i></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask if there is anything else they would like to add.</li> <li>• Thank and close</li> </ul> <p><b>STOP RECORDING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check whether any questions</li> <li>• Reassure about confidentiality</li> <li>• Provide information leaflet</li> <li>• Explore possibility of snowballing (if appropriate).</li> </ul>

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The Social Research Institute works closely with national governments, local public services and the not-for-profit sector. Its c.200 research staff focus on public service and policy issues. Each has expertise in a particular part of the public sector, ensuring we have a detailed understanding of specific sectors and policy challenges. This, combined with our methodological and communications expertise, helps ensure that our research makes a difference for decision makers and communities.