

## **Not-for-Profit Family Mediation In Oxfordshire**

Much research has been carried out on the long-term effects on children of parental separation and divorce. The published results can make depressing reading for both separated parents and society in general, in that what is highlighted is the increased likelihood of problems with, for example, forming lasting relationships, achieving academic potential; and a higher risk of delinquency, unemployment and stress related illnesses. What is usually omitted from the popular reporting of such research is that it is the way that the separation or divorce is handled that has the greatest effect on the children, not the actual separation. If parental separation is handled with sensitivity and without conflict it does not have to have long term adverse affects on children. Family Mediation is a future-focused process in which trained and impartial mediators help separated or divorced clients, who are in dispute, to communicate better. This enables them to reach their own joint decisions and find solutions to the issues under dispute. Experience, and research, has shown that resolving disputes face-to-face in mediation is often more effective, both in terms of cost and time, than at arms length over a period of time via solicitors. Improved communication also helps reduce conflict and bitterness.

The Oxfordshire Family Mediation Service (OFMS) has 10 years experience of providing family mediation services, and last year launched a children's support and information service for children of six years and upwards who are caught up in parental separation and divorce. The Service has a contract with the Legal Aid Board to offer free mediation to anyone qualifying for legal aid to resolve disputes with their former partners, over future arrangements for children, property or finances. Under a section of the Family Law Act 1996 many people seeking legal aid to be represented by a solicitor in a divorce and certain other family matters must first meet with a trained mediator to see if mediation is right for them. Nobody is forced to opt for mediation because it can only work when it is a voluntary process.

Mediation is also available to people not receiving legal aid and fees are set at a level which only aims to cover the cost of the not-for-profit service. However many clients are caught in the poverty trap of being ineligible for legal aid but not being able to meet the cost of the service, but they are never turned away because of this. In the current financial year OFMS need to raise £50,000 from charitable sources to ensure they are able to meet this commitment.

Presently clients are seen at the charity's base in Headington and at an outpost in Banbury; further outposts are planned across the county starting with Didcot later this year.

OFMS can be contacted by telephone, (01865) 741781, or at their office 125 London Road, Headington, OX3 9HZ.