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Sorting out Separation Web app

Evaluation of effectiveness

March 2014

Research Report No 863

A report of research carried out by by Caitlin Connors (Senior Associate Director) and Andrew Thomas (Director), TNS BMRB on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Summary

Background and aims

The ‘Sorting Out Separation’ Web app (Web app), a Government initiative, was launched in November 2012. The Web app offers a range of advice, help and support – as well as signposting to additional expert support sources – for parents who are separating or have separated. It targets couples and specifically parents as they navigate their way through a separation. The Web app is intended to be a one-stop shop for all parents – including the harder to reach – to help them find the support that is right for them. By helping parents to work through the separation process collaboratively and consider the best interests of their children, it is hoped that the outcomes for their children can be significantly improved.

TNS BMRB was commissioned by DWP to evaluate whether the Web app meets the information, support and signposting needs of separating and separated couples, and to identify any potential changes which would enhance its value and usefulness.

The research had two primary aims:

- 1 to evaluate whether the Web app **meets the information, support and signposting needs of separating and separated couples**, identifying ways to optimise the offering to reach the target audience; and
- 2 **to explore how hard to reach / disengaged groups could be encouraged to use the Web app** and understand whether their support requirements are similar or different to other groups of separating couples using the Web app.

In order to do this, research needed to understand the context in which separation occurs as well as attitudes and behaviours around support-seeking, test the general concept of online provisions of separation support, and understand specific views of and responses to the Sorting Out Separation Web app.

This report presents the findings from this research which was carried out **between February and June 2013. The findings and recommendations in this report relate to the Web app at that period of time.** It is based on qualitative research, including:

- 18 reconvened focus groups with parents and couples without children;
- 2 single-session focus groups with grandparents; and
- 14 in-depth interviews with previous users of the Web app.¹

¹ See Section 1.3 for full methodological details.

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List of abbreviations

BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
CM	Child maintenance
CSA	Child Support Agency
DfE	Department for Education
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
HMRC	Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
HR	Human Resources
HSSF	Help and Support for Separated Families
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
NHS	National Health Service
NI	National Insurance
ONS	Office of National Statistics
SEG	Socio Economic Group
SPa	State Pension age
UK	United Kingdom
Web app	'Sorting Out Separation Web app'

Executive summary

This research provides an evaluation of the Government's 'Sorting out Separation Web app', which delivers a range of information and support to separated or separating couples. It presents findings based on a mixed-method qualitative study, including 18 reconvened focus groups with a range of general target audience members and harder to reach groups, 2 focus groups with grandparents, and 14 in-depth interviews with previous Web app users. **The research took place between February and June 2013. The findings and recommendations in this report relate to the Web app at that period of time.**

The report is divided into the following chapters:

- Chapter 1 provides initial context regarding the background to, and objectives of, the research, the methods used, and the research sample.
- Chapter 2 briefly explores the context in which individuals look for help and support around separation, participants' current information and support seeking needs, and how and where people typically seek support.
- Chapter 3 discusses participants' response to the concept of the Web app, including both general views of on-line support about separation as well as specific responses to the concept of a 'one-stop shop.'
- Chapter 4 explores participant response to the Web app itself and how it does or does not meet participant expectations and needs, including discussion of the influence of site 'first impressions' and specific content on perceived value, and some recommendations to improve the offering for the general target audience and specific groups.
- Chapter 5 discusses accessibility factors that also affect user experience of the Web app, including access and hosting considerations, ideal platforms for use, and noted navigation and usability issues.
- Chapter 6 briefly explores reported impact of the Web app in terms of user next steps.
- In Chapter 7 we summarise our overall conclusions and recommendations to optimise the Web app offering for the target audience and help ensure awareness and use.

In summary, the Web app was considered to be a valuable resource for a range of separated and separating individuals, particularly those with more complex relationships, and for those who are recently, or in the process of, separating. It may be particularly beneficial in reaching some harder to reach audiences such as men and black and minority ethnic (BME) participants. However, research identifies a range of potential improvements to ensure that audiences can easily access, navigate and consider the range of useful information provided, and 'first impression' and site content factors which may help engage potential users.

Background and aims

The 'Sorting out Separation' Web app (Web app), a government initiative, was launched in November 2012. The Web app offers a range of advice, help and support – as well as signposting to additional expert support sources – for parents who are separating or have separated. It targets couples and specifically parents as they navigate their way through a separation. The Web app is intended to be a one-stop shop for all parents – including the harder to reach – to help them find the support that is right for them. By helping parents to work through the separation process collaboratively and consider the best interests of their children, it is hoped that the outcomes for their children can be significantly improved.

TNS BMRB was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to evaluate whether the Web app meets the information, support and signposting needs of separating and separated couples, and to identify any potential changes which would enhance its value and usefulness.

The research had two primary aims:

- 1 to evaluate whether the Web app meets the information, support and signposting needs of separating and separated couples, identifying ways to optimise the offering to reach the target audience; and
- 2 to explore how hard to reach/disengaged groups could be encouraged to use the Web app and understand whether their support requirements are similar or different to other groups of separating couples using the Web app.

In order to do this, research needed to understand the context in which separation occurs as well as attitudes and behaviours around support-seeking, test the general concept of on-line provisions of separation support, and understand specific views of and responses to the Sorting out Separation Web app.

This report presents the findings from this research which was carried out **between February and June 2013. The findings and recommendations in this report relate to the Web app at that period of time.** It is based on qualitative research, including:

- 18 reconvened focus groups with parents and couples without children;
- two single-session focus groups with grandparents; and
- 14 in-depth interviews with previous users of the Web app².

Conclusions

- Separating individuals have a wide range of needs across a variety of key topic areas. Needs tend to occur within a context of high stress and complex emotion, with information most critically required at the early stages of separation. Individuals often find it difficult to identify their full range of need and consider these in a calm or reflective fashion, think ahead to future issues and situations that are likely to occur, or consider how they may manage these successfully. Support needs tend to arise via 'critical events', driving respondents to seek information in a piecemeal and reactive way from 'silos of support.'
- Informal networks of support consisting of family and friends tend to be the first port of call. However, research identified a window of opportunity for on-line support methods

² *ibid.*

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given recognised barriers around informal supports (for example, regarding credibility of information and concerns about privacy and embarrassment) and more formal support sources (for example, around convenience and access). On-line support may be particularly beneficial for some more 'hard to reach' audiences (for example, men and black and minority ethnic (BME) individuals) or those who are particularly concerned about sharing private information around separation. Perceived benefits of on-line supports included: the potential to provide a wide range of information; accessibility and convenience; anonymity and private access of support; and the provision of impartial information.

- However, any on-line service around separation also must overcome some key barriers, including concerns about: potential lack of 'empathy' and a 'human element'; poor information quality in terms of breadth of detail and correctness of information; and confidentiality and privacy risks when submitting personal information on line.
- Interest in the Web app was generally high across both the target audience and many harder to reach groups. The 'one-stop shop' approach to gathering information across a wide range of issues and topics appealed, the range of support was considered useful and relevant, and the combination of website text and signposting was considered to be a reasonable way to provide the needed range of information for a general audience. There was also evidence that it could be of value to other users as well, although some modifications may be required. The site was less engaging for some groups, including teenagers, longer-term separated individuals, and those without children.
- However, there were concerns that not enough detail was provided on the site itself, which could disengage users – and call into question whether the site really offered a 'one-stop shop.' Additionally, the range of information on offer was not clear to many users, nor was there considered to be adequate design and prompting to encourage consideration and reflection about the range of issues that may be relevant to them, and how to manage these. Research also identified a range of specific potential improvements to further engagement and add value – in terms of ensuring positive first impressions, providing reassurance around confidentiality, adding a 'human element' and some navigation or usability issues.
- Although there was interest in personalised content or assistance in navigating the site information in a more tailored way, the Action Plan was generally not thought to be working well at present.
- In terms of access and hosting, participants were less likely to find and access the site via a general internet search; signposting is likely to be required. Taking a 'hosting' approach caused some confusion and navigation difficulties, and there was an overall consumer preference for a stand-alone site. There was keen interest in Web app availability across a range of platforms (including tablets and phones), although usability must be ensured across devices for this to be useful.
- Although research was not explicitly intended to explore impact of the Web app amongst previous users, it was noted that under real-life conditions many had found it useful and relevant. Some participants noted that they had 'saved' or 'printed' information for further reference, discussed materials with partners or other support sources, or recommended the site to others.

Recommendations

- In order to reach the target audience, the Web app is likely to have to be directly marketed (for example, signposted) from other face-to-face and internet support sources where people are already searching for support – for example, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) tax credits, DWP benefits, local authority housing, Child Maintenance (CM) Options, and National Health Service (NHS) health professionals and websites. Ideally, the site should also be search-engine optimised across key words related to ‘silo searching’ (for example, ‘housing’, ‘benefits’ and ‘child maintenance’).
- On initial viewing, users were often unclear about the purpose of the site and the range of information it offers. There is a missed opportunity to ensure that users: 1) access the full range of materials relevant to them; and 2) are prompted to reflect on their situation; 3) engage with the range of issues they may face; and 4) develop initial strategies to manage these well or seek further information they may need. This could potentially be mitigated by altering the home page design to clearly display the range of information on offer and invite users to consider what is most relevant to them, and by providing more explicit framing about what the site is meant to do – potentially via a ‘mission statement’ or short simple introduction on the home page.
- The site title should be changed to avoid raising incorrect expectations (that it is a downloadable ‘Web app’ or disengaging some audiences (who do not identify with the use of the word ‘separation’). If the site intends to engage male users and those without children, the logo also requires adjustment.
- Although the site overcomes many initial hesitations around on-line support provision, it may add value to additionally: 1) provide reassurance around the confidentiality and anonymity of site use; 2) clearly establish the credibility of information on offer via clarifying that the information is government supplied; and 3) include more interactive elements such as forums, chat rooms or testimonials. Chat rooms or forums in particular may be useful in order to help users explore more specific issues and needs that it would not be possible to address in the main (more general) website content.
- Participants raised frustrations around the low level of detail provided by the site itself prior to signposting. Given the impossibility of providing specific information to respond to all user needs, research suggests it would be useful to focus additional content on mapping the range of issues that may take place and the questions that users may need to ask themselves now and in the future. This should recognise and acknowledge realistic problems around separation – both in terms of the messiness and unpleasant emotions involved for those separating, and in terms of potential problem points around the solutions and support. The site will lose credibility if it is perceived as offering unrealistically positive solutions or does not acknowledge real-world situations.
- Ideally, research suggests the site should appear via a stand-alone web page rather than embedded on host sites in order to: 1) establish a clear and distinct brand, avoiding confusion between the offering and host sites; 2) minimise navigation and usability issues; and 3) establish credibility. Overall, research suggests that government hosting would be beneficial, as long as people do not have to enter any personal information, assurance of anonymity is provided, it is not hosted via the Government Gateway, and government intentions around offering separation support are made explicit.

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- Ideally, the site would benefit from full usability testing to ensure ease of use across the full range of potential platforms, particularly mobile devices. Research indicates that mobile internet use was high in the target audience, overcoming potential access concerns around laptop and computer availability, and particularly likely to be used in moments of critical need.
- In order to engage BME audiences and men particularly, the site should: 1) include culturally-specific content such as information around cultural stigma and Sharia law; and 2) avoid negative portrayals of BME individuals and men about how they are portrayed.
- Research suggests it may not be advisable to focus efforts on trying to attract teenage parents to the site, given that these groups have very different needs than other audience, in terms of information format and overall design, and are more likely to use 'proxies' to gather information rather than search independently.
- If there is interest in engaging individuals without children, the site would need significant revision to the logo, video content and general site copy to avoid perceptions that it is too 'family-focused' to be relevant.

1 Introduction

The ‘Sorting Out Separation’ Web app (Web app), a government initiative, launched in November 2012. The Web app offers a range of advice, help and support – as well as signposting to additional expert support sources – for parents who are separating or have separated.

The Web app is part of the Government’s ‘Help and Support for Separated Families’ (HSSF) initiative³, which aims to better co-ordinate expert support services to help parents work together to achieve the best for their children. It targets couples and specifically parents as they navigate their way through a separation. The Web app is intended to be a one-stop shop for all parents – including the harder to reach – to help them find the support that is right for them. By helping parents to work through the separation process collaboratively and consider the best interests of their children, it is hoped that the outcomes for their children can be significantly improved.

TNS BMRB was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to evaluate whether the Web app meets the information, support and signposting needs of separating and separated couples, and to identify any potential changes which would enhance its value and usefulness. This report presents the findings from this research based on qualitative research carried out between February and June 2013, including:

- 18 reconvened focus groups with parents and couples without children;
- two single-session focus groups with grandparents; and
- 14 in-depth interviews with previous users of the Web app.⁴

1.1 Setting the context

Separation is a widespread and serious issue for many United Kingdom (UK) families and children. Current estimates suggest that around five million parents (or 2.5 million families) have gone through a separation and just over four million dependent children (just under a third of all dependent children) are not living with both birth parents.⁵ Of these, a quarter are living in a lone parent household (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2012).⁶ It is predicted that one in three children will experience parental separation before the age of 16.⁷

³ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120713194839/http://www.dwp.gov.uk/supplying-dwp/what-we-buy/general-goods-and-services/innovation-fund-separated-fam/>

⁴ See Section 1.3 for full methodological details.

⁵ Punton-Li, *et al.*, (2012). Separated families and child maintenance arrangements Great Britain 2011, DWP.

⁶ ONS Statistical Bulletin: Families and Households 2012. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/families-and-households/2012/stb-families-households.html>

⁷ Maclean, M. (2004). *Together and Apart: Children and parents experiencing separation and divorce*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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The potentially negative impact of parental relationship breakdown on emotional, social and financial outcomes of all family members has been well-discussed and documented.⁸ For children, separation typically has a negative impact on a range of outcomes such as academic success, conduct and levels of behaviour problems, psychological well-being, self-esteem and peer relations.⁹ However, the evidence shows that the way the family functions before, during and after parental separation can mitigate negative affects; there are steps that parents can take to help produce more positive outcomes.¹⁰

In recognition of the potentially harmful consequences of relationship breakdown on couples and children, much attention has been focused on developing services that will help couples and specifically parents navigate their way through this difficult time – whether the goal is to prevent breakdown or to separate – and to **encourage co-operative parenting**. As part of the Government’s commitment to strengthening and supporting families, policy development has prioritised the need to help **promote positive family relationships and to build resilience** to future problems.¹¹ The aim is to ensure that parents have access to the help and support they need, both to maintain their relationships and to improve their ability to parent their children effectively. This package of support is tailored to key points when relationships often struggle, such as the transition to parenthood.¹² The Government is also currently reforming the family law and child maintenance systems to help parents work through their issues collaboratively, ideally minimising the need for court-brokered interventions and reducing the damage and disruption for children.

The Government announced up to £20 million to develop this support under a programme of initiatives called ‘Help and Support for Separated Families’ (HSSF). This is designed to better co-ordinate expert support services to help parents work together to achieve the best for their children. This money is intended to fund a range of enhanced support, including a Web application; co-ordinated telephone networks; a quality mark and the HSSF Innovation Fund.

1.2 Barriers to seeking help

In order for these relationship support services to succeed, couples need to be aware of the support being provided and must be **willing to engage**. However, evidence suggests that many separating couples currently do not receive the support they need; couples often

⁸ For example, Coleman, L. and Glenn, F. (2009). *When couples part: Understanding the consequences for adults and children*, One Plus One.

⁹ Amato, P.R. (2005). *The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation*, in *The Future of Children* 15 (2). Washington, D.C. and Princeton, N.J.:Brookings Institution and Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University.

¹⁰ Mooney, A., Oliver, G. and Smith, M. (2009). *Impact of Family Breakdown on Children’s Well-Being: Evidence*. DCSF research report RR113.

¹¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/176902/strengthening-families.pdf.pdf

¹² For example, see Walker, *et. al.* (2010). *Relationships Matter: Understanding the Needs of Adults (Particularly Parents) Regarding Relationship Support*. DCSF research report RR233.

fail to seek help, or do so only when problems have become irreversibly entrenched.¹³ For example, recent DWP data showed that more than half of separated UK parents (52 per cent) found it hard to access the help and support they needed.¹⁴ Thirty-nine per cent of parents in their sample did not access any professional support when they separated from their partners; of these 25 per cent of parents said they could not find the right help or support, or they felt embarrassed discussing their needs.

Previous research¹⁵ – primarily focused on understanding barriers to engagement with face-to-face service delivery – suggests that couples in difficulty fail to seek or access help for a wide range of reasons, including:

- a reluctance to discuss private relationship problems with support personnel;
 - denial or failure to recognise the severity of their problems;
 - not knowing what support is available or how to find it;
 - having negative experiences or perceptions of services (for example, counsellors or mediators who are judgemental and/or take sides);
 - limited access to, or non-availability of, services (long waiting lists, restricted appointment times, long distances to travel, clash with other care commitments);
 - prohibitive costs (high costs of counselling and mediation sessions, childcare and travel);and
 - unwillingness to give the impression of shared responsibility for what has gone wrong in the relationship.
- additionally, separation is generally a time of severe stress and significant emotional difficulty.¹⁶ Individuals in need may find it difficult to seek help – and indeed to identify and reflect on their own specific and practical needs – within this context.

In order to be effective, it is critical that help and support services for this audience take into account their specific needs and circumstances, and address the barriers above. It also needs to understand specific barriers for particularly hard to reach groups, as discussed in the following section.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ YouGov research on-line survey conducted for DWP between 7–12 October 2012 on a sample of 2,505 UK adults: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/help-for-separating-parents-at-their-fingertips-as-new-web-app-launches-a-third-of-children-now-live-in-separated-families>

¹⁵ Chang, Y. S. and Barrett, H. (2009). *Couple Relationships: A review of the nature and effectiveness of support services*, Family and Parenting Institute.
Walker et al. Op.Cit. Izzidien, S. (2008). 'I can't tell people what is happening at home': *Domestic abuse within South Asian communities: the specific needs of women, children and young people*. NSPCC.
Goodwin, R. and Cramer, D. (1998). Attitudes towards marital counselling and the Family Law Act (1996) in a British Asian community. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*: Vol 11 (4), pages: 417–425.

¹⁶ For example, Richards, M., Hardy, R. and Wadsworth, M. (1997). The effects of divorce and separation on mental health in a national UK birth cohort. *Psychological Medicine* 27.05: 1121–1128.

1.3 Groups who are harder to engage in services

There is a growing body of evidence about the types of parents who are less likely to access relationship support services. These people are often referred to as the ‘hard to reach’, though Barrett (2008)¹⁷ argues that they might more accurately be described as:

- The ‘**under-represented**’ – parents who might be marginalised, economically disadvantaged or socially excluded, such as refugee and asylum-seeking families, homeless families, minority ethnic families, traveller families etc.;
- The ‘**invisible**’ – those who are unable to articulate their needs or who might be slipping through the net, (for example, young carers, fathers, parents with mental health problems etc.); and
- The ‘**service-resistant**’ – those who are unwilling to engage, suspicious, over-targeted, blind to the problem or disengaged from opportunities, (for example, long-term multi-problem families; criminally active families; domestic violence/abuse perpetrators; substance abusing parents etc.).

Evidence suggests that a range of particular groups are more likely to encounter difficulties in accessing services:

- ‘Katz *et al.* (2007),¹⁸ argue that **fathers** are less likely to access support services, and non-resident parents (typically fathers) are less likely to be satisfied with the services they receive;
- Barrett and Chang (2009),¹⁹ argue that **men** are generally reluctant to seek help from couple support services and they may find help provided through less personal channels more useful (for example phone and websites);
- Barrett *et al.* (2010),²⁰ highlight three groups who find it difficult to access services: fathers, if providers appear to fail to offer a gender-inclusive service; couples whose relationships are characterised by violence; and couples from minority ethnic communities, who may either fear disclosure within their community or who may perceive service providers as lacking insight into their particular predicament’; and
- Bourne and Ryan (2012),²¹ conclude that there are two key groups of fathers whose needs do not appear to be met by existing services: young fathers and fathers from BME communities.

Additional groups which are commonly assumed to be harder to engage in services include lone parents, teenage parents, disabled parents and parents from ethnic minority groups.

Little is known about whether on-line service provision around separation may help mitigate the general barriers around accessing support, or help provide specific ‘in roads’ for harder to reach groups.

¹⁷ Barrett, H., (2008). *‘Hard to Reach’ Families: Engagement in the Voluntary and Community Sector*. Family and Parenting Institute, London.

¹⁸ Katz, I., La Placa, V. and Hunter, S. (2007). *Barriers to inclusion and successful engagement of parents in mainstream services*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

¹⁹ *Op. Cit.* Barrett and Chang. (2009).

²⁰ Barrett, H., Chang, Y.S and Walker, J. (2010). *Improving children’s outcomes by supporting parental and carer–couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence*. Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services.

²¹ *Op. Cit.* Bourne and Ryan 2012.

In the following section we introduce the Sorting out Separation Web app and its intended aims in supporting separating couples.

1.4 The Sorting out Separation Web app

This on-line information hub built on one of the ideas proposed in the Green Paper, *Strengthening families, promoting parental responsibility: the future of child maintenance*,²² which had highlighted the Government's ambition to co-ordinate support services for separating and lone parents. Whilst recognising that there are existing support services available in the UK, it was suggested that there was no unified source of help to connect parents with the different support services they need throughout and beyond separation.

The need for better support and information resources as well as alternative processes to help parents resolve their difficulties outside the court room was addressed in the Family Justice Review. It was proposed that parents should have ready access to a wide range of information and direction to any further support they might need. Among the recommendations outlined was the idea that government should establish an on-line information hub and helpline to give information and support for couples to help them resolve issues following divorce or separation outside court. This information hub and helpline was intended to bring together and expand other government websites directed to separating parents.

The Sorting out Separation Web app is the first part of the Government's 'Help and Support for Separated Families' programme. The Web app has been developed in partnership by a range of government departments (including DWP, Ministry of Justice (MOJ), Department for Education (DfE) and the devolved administrations), together with the private, voluntary and community sector, based on the recommendations from an expert steering group. It provides separating parents, those contemplating separation (and their friends or family) with support, help with prioritising their needs and a signposting service to sources of relevant expert help.

The Web app is intended to be a **one-stop shop** for all separated parents – including the harder to reach – to help them find the support that is right for them. It offers help on a diverse range of issues such as managing conflict, parenting apart, dealing with the emotional impact of breaking up and more practical issues such as legal and housing support and arranging child maintenance.

1.5 Research aims

The research had two primary aims:

- 1 to evaluate whether the Web app **meets the information, support and signposting needs of separating and separated couples**, identifying ways to optimise the offering to reach the target audience; and
- 2 **to explore how hard to reach/disengaged groups could be encouraged to use the Web app** and understand whether their support requirements are similar or different to other groups of separating couples using the Web app.

²² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220421/strengthening-families.pdf

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In order to do this, research was needed to understand the context in which separation occurs as well as attitudes and behaviours around support-seeking, test the general concept of on-line provisions of separation support, and understand specific views of and responses to the Sorting out Separation Web app.

Underpinning these broad aims, the research also specifically explored seven key questions:

- 1 How, where and when do separating couples look for relevant information and what information are they looking for?
- 2 What part does/has the Web app played in providing this information?
- 3 For hard to reach/disengaged groups, what are the barriers to accessing the Web app, and what would overcome them?
- 4 With exposure to the Web app, how do the usual target group and the hard to reach/disengaged groups view the Web app in terms of information content, support and signposting?
- 5 Are there any differences in the requirements for the Web app according to different customer groups, and what are they?
- 6 What features, content and interventions would enhance the user experience of the Web app (i.e. what is missing from the Web app)?
- 7 What aspects of the look and feel of the Web app could be changed in order to enhance the user experience?

1.6 Research approach and sample

In order to robustly explore the needs of separating couples and views about the Web app we utilised mixed-method qualitative research. This included presenting and discussing the Web app with people who had not used it before through a series of reconvened and standard focus groups, and through in-depth interviews with a small number of existing Web app 'users'. **The research took place between February and June 2013. The findings and recommendations in this report relate to the Web app at that period of time.**

As this was a qualitative study the rationale for selecting the sample was not to recruit a statistically representative sample of all people, but to ensure diversity of coverage across certain key variables (purposive sampling). Eligibility for the research was determined using a short screening questionnaire and quotas were set in order to prescribe the distribution of the sample selected.

To ensure consistency of coverage across the focus groups and interviews facilitators followed a detailed topic guide that outlined the topics that were to be addressed. Although topic guides help to ensure systematic coverage of key issues across interviews, they are used flexibly, to allow issues of relevance for individual respondents to be covered through follow up questioning.

We discuss each aspect of the research as follows:

Reconvened focus groups

Eighteen reconvened focus groups of five to six people each were conducted with parents or couples without children in order to explore the potential appeal of the Web app.

The reconvened groups consisted of an initial ninety minute focus group followed up about a week later with a reconvened two hour focus group. In the intervening period participants were set a web-based task to complete. This two-stage design enabled us to tease out participants' initial needs and expectations regarding on-line support, as well as more concrete and informed views about the Web app (as most participants would not have used the Web app prior to taking part in the research).

Initial group discussions explored participants' relationship context, history of help seeking, requirements for a relationship support service, views about support being provided on line and how would they feel about using this type of service. At the end of the first group discussion, participants were given a web-based task which involved finding and using the Web app before the reconvened session. Participants filled out a short completion sheet to document their experience and serve as a memory prompt in reconvened discussions, where we discussed the content and 'look and feel' of the Web app and whether this did or did not meet their needs and expectations.

This flexible, responsive and exploratory approach enabled us to generate richer and more detailed insights investigating the more subtle and complex factors that underpinned views and judgements about the Web app.

The group discussion sample was designed to ensure a mix of the general target population for the Web app, including audiences that are considered more 'hard to reach' (including men, teenage parents and black and minority ethnic representatives). The sample included a cross section of people at different stages of their separation, including those who do and do not have children. All parents had either a formal or informal family agreement or a court arrangement that was not considered to be working well.

Focus groups were divided according to whether participants had children or not and the length of time since separating (i.e. recently and longer-term separated). We did not set specific quotas for age, or marital status (i.e. married and separating, or living as married and separating). All groups were single gender.

In summary this aspect of research included two groups each with:

- Recently separated parents (within six months).
- Longer-term separated parents (six months to two years).
- Separating childless couples.
- Couples that had never lived together ('Never together').
- Recently separated BME parents (within six months).
- Longer-term separated BME parents (six months to two years).
- Separating childless BME couples.
- Teenage parents (mixed short and longer-term separated).
- Separating couples that are disengaged from using the internet for relationship advice (mixed short and longer-term separated).

By bringing together people in similar circumstances, the reconvened focus groups were designed to ensure participants would feel comfortable about discussing their separation support needs. They were smaller in size (up to six participants in each focus group) to allow more time for discussion and to build the group dynamic more easily.

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Participants for reconvened group discussions were recruited using standard 'free-find' techniques.

Single session focus groups with grandparents

As discussed earlier, families are often a key provider of emotional and practical support. Consequently, it was important to explore whether they also require information and guidance in order to assist the separating couple. Two group discussions with grandparents (i.e. parents of a separating couple) were convened to explore how they provide support, the information sources they had used, whether they felt they needed any additional support, and their views about the value of the Web app in helping them to support others.

The discussions were one hour in length. They were mixed gender and mixed ethnicity and represented couples that were short- and longer-term separated.

In-depth interviews

Fourteen in-depth interviews with existing users of the Web app were undertaken as a means of exploring their experiences of obtaining relevant information about separation on line. During the hour-long interviews the topic coverage was broadly similar to that of the group discussions, but in addition focused on their use of the Web app and allowed them to show us those aspects of the Web app that worked well and those that did not, whether the Web app provided all the support they needed, and whether additional support was required.

Existing users of the Web app were sourced in two ways: from a Child Maintenance Options survey (twelve participants), and by placing adverts on some of the websites hosting the Web app (two participants). The sample was mixed gender, mixed ethnicity and comprised short- and longer-term separated people.

Data capture and analysis

The focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded. The material collected was subject to a thematic content analysis which provides both rigour and transparency without losing the benefits of intuition and creative thinking.

The qualitative findings reported below have been illustrated with the use of case illustrations, quotations, and examples. These are used to illustrate the findings and are drawn from across the sample. The purposive nature of the sample, however, means that the study cannot provide any statistical data relating to the prevalence of these views and experiences.

2 Seeking information and support around separation

In this chapter we summarise the context in which people need and seek help around separation in order to understand the ‘window of opportunity’ for the Web app offering. These contextual findings provide valuable learning about the role that information and support can play, when this is most needed, and guidance regarding general triggers and barriers around accessing on-line support.

Depending in part on the complexity of the relationship in question, participants identified a wide range of needs around separation. However, participants characterised separation as a time of extreme stress and high emotion, and as a complicated process often characterised by ambiguity and doubt. Sensitivity around stigma, taboo and judgment was high. Within these circumstances, identifying needs and working through issues calmly and rationally was considered very difficult.

On-line support around separation was often not top of people’s minds within this context, as participants often relied initially on informal sources of help via friends and family, then escalated to a range of other sources (for example, government bodies, charities, solicitors, etc.) if this was insufficient or unavailable. However, there was evidence of a use of a range of on-line support sources within the sample, in part because of noted disadvantages of other support sources. Within this context, research suggests there is a key opportunity for the Web app in terms of providing impartial, convenient and private help and information during a difficult time.

2.1 Context in which people need help with separation

Whilst it was not the primary purpose of this research to explore exhaustively the specific circumstances and processes by which people separated, participants often alluded to these in passing. For this reason we begin by providing a brief overview of some contextual factors which seemed to inform participants’ separation experiences and, consequently, their overall support requirements. We explore three key considerations below:

- **The emotional difficulty and ‘messiness’ of the separation process:** Irrespective of the circumstances of separation, participants unsurprisingly described it as a complex and difficult process. Universally, separation was found to be extremely emotionally taxing and stressful – a period of confusion and strong emotion. They described it as a very difficult time to think clearly and rationally about the problems they were facing.

“At the time you need help, you aren’t thinking straight, your blood pressure is high...”

(Recently separated, BME, Male, London)

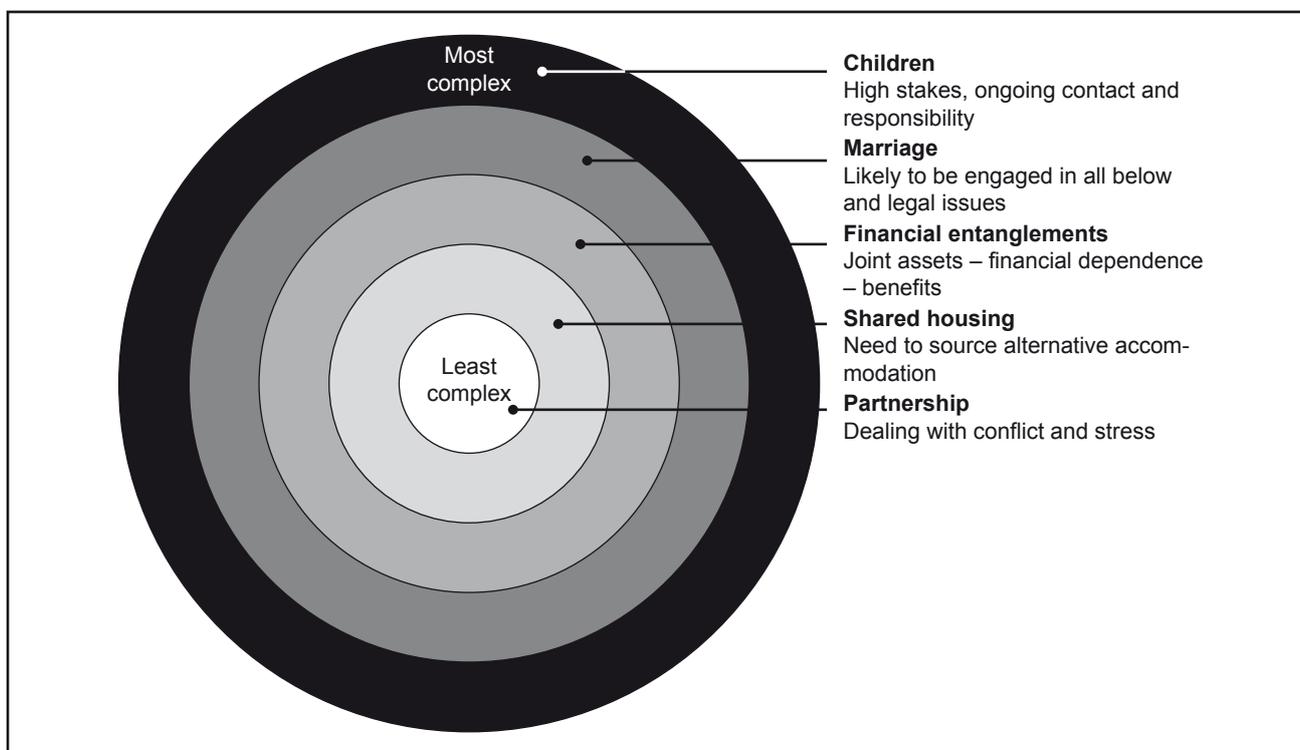
This stress and emotional turmoil was often exacerbated by experience of separation as ‘in flux’, messy and protracted. Participants often moved through different stages of their relationship difficulties and reconciliation before actually separating. Even when people had arrived at the decision to separate it often still took some time for them to actually achieve this, or to identify with the idea of being ‘separated.’

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- **The importance of relationship complexity:** The range of experiences reported clearly showed that information and support needs tended to rise in tandem with the overall complexity of the relationship in question. Although dissolution of any partnership could be stressful, needs became more pronounced and various depending on the additional emotional, financial, legal and family entanglements involved; more extended and intricate entanglements with (ex) partners typically resulted in more need for information and support. For example, needs of those who were simply cohabitating at point of separation were much lower than those who:
 - had more complex financial relationships (such as a shared mortgage, or relationships in which one person was financially dependent);
 - were married (and, therefore, needed to become legally separated or divorced); or
 - had children (involving long-term continued contact and shared financial and personal responsibility), particularly if these were dependent.

This link between relationship complexity and overall need is represented in Figure 2.1. Although these were by no means the only factors determining overall audience support needs,²³ relationship complexity emerged as a useful ‘shorthand’ to understand the level of support required across the research audience. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, it often also influenced overall response to the Web app support offering, as those with a wider range of information needs had more desire for a ‘one-stop shop.’

Figure 2.1 Needs grow with relationship complexity



²³ As this was not the primary focus of research this range of factors is not explored in depth here. Some noted additional factors included the age of those separating, whether the separation was mutual or more acrimonious, and the financial circumstances of those separating.

- **The reluctance to share personal situations with others:** Participants often mentioned the taboo, stigma and embarrassment attached to separation, which influenced the choices and decisions they made about who to talk to and whether to seek help or not whilst they were separating. Participants voiced concerns about being judged, or having failed in their relationship, and sometimes identified a sense of shame about separating. This was most marked for those with a strong cultural background as this presented additional barriers about discussing separation and divorce with members of their own family and community.

Taking these key contextual factors into consideration, the following section identifies the range of support and information needs participants identified around separation.

2.2 Support needs around separation

2.2.1 Overall support needs

In general, there was considerable overlap between the primary support needs that different groups of participants identified, although a wider range of support needs were identified for those with more complex relationships, as discussed above.

The primary areas of support that participants identified included:

- **Emotional support around coping and conflict**, in the form of someone to talk to and offload to; advice about how to manage or avoid conflict with (ex) partners; how to recover from abuse or domestic violence; help to address feelings of despair, loneliness and abandonment; as well as looking for reassurance about how to cope practically and financially, depending on the circumstances. A specific need for the avoidance of conflict and anger management was also raised by both men and women in the sample.

“I needed some confirmation that I wasn’t going mad. I suddenly felt like very much a non-person. I think I lost all my self-esteem and I didn’t want to go out. I was frightened to death of going anywhere. And it was just really hard.”

(Recently separated, Female, Manchester)

- **Finance and money** – Financial support needs related to financial planning and budgeting; splitting joint assets (prior to as well as after separating); how to manage the household on less income (and dealing with mortgage repayments for those who owned their own homes); adjusting pre-existing or making new claims for benefits and tax credits; how to support financially dependent (ex) partners; calculating the financial advantages of whether mothers should return to work.

“I think the financial side is the biggest part and that’s the hardest part I think of breaking up with somebody... Getting to know where the money goes to, how it’s split, or getting out of contracts and other things like that.”

(No children, Male, Manchester)

“I wanted to know what I was entitled to.”

(Recently separated, Female, Manchester)

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- **Child and parenting support** – in terms of setting and enforcing child maintenance payments; agreeing contact and care schedules; arranging and funding childcare; shielding children from the stress and negative emotion of separation; and managing schooling (for example, finding a new school after moving, deciding where children would be schooled under shared care agreements).
- **Housing support needs** – Housing needs were concerned with finding emergency accommodation or housing support (mainly for men); dealing with shared housing issues (for example, rental agreements, mortgage repayments, dissolving mortgages and selling a property) and investigating the consequences of falling behind with a mortgage repayment.
- **Legal support needs** – related to divorce and separation as well as issues related to child visitation and contact (particularly for fathers). This latter issue was a particular concern for those who never lived with their partners and may have needed to involve the courts or mediation service to address their issues.

Stretching across the areas of need above, participants also noted a need to ‘keep their heads’ during difficult circumstances; to avoid acting reactively and rashly, and to try to manage the situation in a way which minimised negative fallout for themselves and others.

2.2.2 Audience differences

As discussed previously, the range of informational and support needs experienced by participants tended to depend largely on the overall complexity of the relationship in question. In addition to this key difference, some audience-specific differences in needs were also evident across both the key target audience and those in the harder to reach categories. These are briefly summarised by audience as follows:²⁴

- **Women:** Women were more likely overall to be primary carers of children and, therefore, subject to a wider range of needs related to support of children, as summarised above. They were also more likely to be financially dependent, and to need support around obtaining relevant benefits and entitlements, or around general financial planning.
- **Men:** Men overall tended to put more focus on their responsibilities and rights in terms of child maintenance and visitation agreements. Housing was often a key consideration given that they were more likely to leave shared homes. Responsibilities (legal or personal) for providing for financial dependents was also raised.

“The biggest thing I needed to find out – once she’d actually moved out and after my daughter was born – was legal rights to access.”

(Recently separated, Male, Bristol)

- **Recently separated versus longer-term separated:** Recently separated individuals were more likely to focus on the emotional difficulties of separation, and to have a fuller range of needs across the above – as separation brought up a range of concurrent problems and challenges. Longer-term separated participants typically had fewer and more specific needs related to change of circumstance, such as regarding changes brought about by new partners, new children, or problems with and adjustments to child maintenance agreements.

²⁴ Note that this group was not seen as having specific support needs *per se*, although information seeking patterns obviously were somewhat different, as explored in the section to follow.

“Michael was quite good at first, he gave me money and I was getting credits when I was working – but since then he’s had another five children, and the contribution has reduced, reduced reduced until I got absolutely nothing. So I looked on the CSA website.”

(Never together, Female, Bristol)

- **Childless couples:** Childless couples had fewer needs overall, typically focused on emotional, financial and housing concerns.
- **BME participants:** Although needs were broadly similar to other audiences, some specific needs were raised in relation to cultural pressure and stigma (for example, amongst some Asian and East African participants) and culture-specific legal systems such as Sharia divorce law.

“I’m from Ghana and it’s different separating than for English people... you worry about letting people down, that they judge you haven’t done your duty as a man.”

(Recently separated, BME, Male, London)

- **‘Never togethers’:** Needs were broadly similar to other groups, although some additional complications were raised regarding rights to child contact and maintenance.
- **Grandparents:** Needs for information varied according to the dependency of their child (for example, age and financial circumstances), with participants indicating more information needs in relation to supporting younger, dependent children. Specific information was indicated around how to support children to manage separation amicably, and to engage with their children’s ex-partners and families amicably.
- **Teenage parents:** Teenage mothers specifically raised more general issues relating to their health, their transition to parenthood, their contraception needs as well as advice about abortion. Immediate needs about parenting often took priority over needs related to separation per se. Teenage fathers tended to be more concerned with gaining contact with their child and to a lesser extent providing maintenance payments.

The following section explores when and how the target audience are currently seeking information about separation and related issues, in order to understand the ‘window of opportunity’ for the Web app offering.

2.3 Patterns of information seeking

Research briefly explored participants’ general triggers for information and support seeking, the way in which they sought support, general channels of support used, and barriers experienced around seeking or receiving support. These contextual considerations are explored as follows.

2.3.1 Triggers for support and information seeking

Typically, information and support needs occurred close to the point of separation (just before, during or soon after). However, as noted previously, separation was considered to be a messy and protracted process. In consequence, needs often arose before participants had formally separated, and potentially even before they realised that they were on a journey towards separation.

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Although there was some evidence of 'advance' information seeking (for example, couples considering the consequences of separation during a slow burn process of 'drifting apart'), more often information seeking and support needs tended to arise suddenly via 'critical' events. For example, existing conflicts might come to a head and prompt one partner to leave home, or ask the other to leave – prompting an immediate need for housing advice, as well as potentially emotional support. A similar scenario emerged for longer-term separated participants; participants frequently reported that they began searching for information upon critical changes in circumstances, such as demands for more maintenance funds, or child contact being refused.

“It’s not as simple as that (separation) – it was such a shock to me that she wanted me to leave. I was looking for help about relationships at the same time I was looking for a place to stay, homeless. I didn’t think of it as separation yet, that came later – it was a crisis in our relationship.”

(No children, BME, Male, London)

“The boys came over the weekend and he didn’t return them back on time Monday morning. Communication had also gotten difficult between us since he remarried. I got scared and I needed some legal advice on the matter, but I couldn’t afford to pay for it. So I just did a Google search – it was the most obvious place to look.”

(Previous user, Female, Ascot)

Rather than searching for 'separation' as a unified concept, information and support seeking was typically conducted in a reactive and haphazard fashion, with participants seeking information in 'silo' fashion on an issue-by-issue basis as problems arose. They noted that they were typically searching for help under duress, and in a heightened emotional state. Some participants mentioned the discomfort and destabilisation of the situation, a feeling that 'you don't know what you don't know' and are not able to engage in clear planning.

“You are confused, you don’t know where to start. It’s a labyrinth, a rabbit hole. And you can’t access things or prioritise when you are stressed. You are so emotional.”

(No children, Male, London)

2.3.2 Sources of support and information

Participants turned to a range of sources for information, guidance and support around separation; there was no one 'journey' indicated across the sample. However, there were some general commonalities in terms of participant experience.

First, it was evident that informal networks of support – primarily face-to-face support via friends and families – were the 'first port of call' around separation. Participants considered this to be a human issue requiring empathy and support from others. They also noted that it was helpful to share the full unique context of one's circumstances when seeking help.

“It seemed a bit easier for me to just go to my friends and my family and they would talk to me and say yes you are doing the right thing and stuff like that.”

(Separating without children, Male, Manchester)

However, participants noted a range of disadvantages around informal sources of supports which resulted in information seeking from other sources, including:

- For some, lack of access to confidants.
- Concerns about stigma, privacy and sharing.
- The potential for biased advice and support.
- Contradictory opinions and advice.
- The lack of specialist information (such as legal advice).

'I think you just feel alone and embarrassed to talk about it. And I think when you've had a relationship that's not very good, it's sometimes hard to speak to your friends because they've told you, oh, it's this and that, and so it's hard – people do judge you.'

(Recently separated, Female, Birmingham)

"You just don't know where to look ... friends and family are good but everyone is telling you something different."

(Recently separated, BME, Male, London)

When informal supports were unavailable or considered inadequate due to the concerns above, participants then used a range of more formalised support services – typically via face-to-face or telephone contact. Although there was no one 'pattern' of support seeking across these bodies, typical services used were spread across the following:

- **Government bodies** (for example, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Child Support Agency (CSA) and local authorities) – typically approached about rights and arrangements regarding child contact, benefits and financial support, and housing arrangements.
- **Charities** (for example, Relate, Fathers for Justice, the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and Shelter) – for signposting of issues to consider, assistance engaging with government, and audience or issue-specific information.
- **Health counselling and guidance professionals** (for example, mediators, counsellors, National Healthy Service (NHS) doctors, nurses and midwives) – for emotional support and advice about coping.
- **Legal advisors: with reference to formal rights and legal arrangements regarding** child access, divorce proceedings, asset division, etc.

Although participants reported many positive experiences regarding the use of the support sources above, a number of barriers to support seeking and experienced disadvantages were also mentioned. These included:

- As with support from friends and family, general barriers around sharing personal and private information.
- Concerns about being judged, or concerns about formal intervention being triggered (for example, in situations involving domestic violence or potential issues around child welfare).
- Lack of convenience and availability (for example, the need to schedule appointments around existing commitments, and waiting times for services).
- Financial expense, as in the case of legal advice.

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- Perception of shrinking or reducing service provision (for example, reduced services or availability offered by the CAB).
- Often, lack of awareness of provision (for example, of mediation services or particular charities).
- General sense of being overwhelmed, and of not knowing where to look for help.

“You feel like you’re drowning at the time.”

(Longer-term separated, Female, Manchester)

Overall, on-line information tended not to be top of people’s minds when participants were asked where they would turn for help and advice around separation. However, there was evidence of use of this channel for support, via general ‘google’ searching for specific information (for example, ‘child maintenance’), use of websites for the organisations above (particularly Child Maintenance (CM) Options), and use of forums or general information on digital-specific supports such as Mumsnet.

Audience differences

Although information seeking patterns were fairly similar across the sample, there were also some noted differences for harder to reach audiences.

First, some black and ethnic minority (BME) participants, the cultural pressure against separation (as discussed above) tended to decrease the use of informal support networks such as friends and family.

“Within my culture it’s always ‘you’ve got to be the man and solve the problems,’ and ‘it’s all your fault’. People try to make you feel miserable, not help. You keep the relationship at any cost.”

(No children, BME, Male, London)

“You can’t talk to older people and family – the view is always ‘grin and bear it.’”

(Previous user, Asian, Female, Birmingham)

Teenage parents in the sample were somewhat less likely to be seeking information around separation overall; as discussed above, key needs often centred around coping with the transition to parenthood and childcare. In many cases, teenage participants were instead relying on family members to sort out other practical arrangements such as housing arrangements, arranging child maintenance arrangements, or understanding what benefits they were entitled to.

The following section specifically explores the appeal of the Web app concept, and whether participants view on-line information and support as potentially overcoming any of these barriers and disadvantages of more traditional sources of support, as well as audience differences in terms of appeal.

3 Appeal of Web app concept

The success of the Web app will depend not just on the offering content, but how potential users respond to the **concept of an on-line support service** – including the assumptions they make about the potential benefits or downsides of digital versus face-to-face or telephone support, what an on-line support service could provide, and under what circumstances they would be likely to access it. Prior to exploring specific responses to the Web app itself, the research sought to understand the general appeal of on-line support around separation for the range of potential audiences, and responses to the specific concept of an on-line ‘one-stop shop.’

In summary, research suggested that audience interest in on-line support provision around separation was high, and participants identified a range of expected benefits around on-line support provision. These included: the potential for provision of a wide range of information, accessibility, anonymity, and impartiality. However, general barriers to the use of on-line support services – such as concerns about lack of empathy and a ‘human element’, information quality and confidentiality – may need to be addressed. The specific offering of a ‘one-stop shop’ also appealed as a way to navigate the complex issues around separation in a simple and easy way, and to gain perspective about the separation process and range of issues involved. It was proposed that ideally this would be provided by a credible, trusted source, include a range of content and information formats, and be easy to navigate and use.

Participant response to the Web app concept is explored in more detail as follows.

3.1 General appeal of on-line support

Overall, participants were very positive about the potential for information and support around separation to be provided on line, and there was some evidence that this could be particularly beneficial for some harder to reach groups. However, a range of potential barriers to use of on-line support were also identified that may need to be taken into account.

Audience response regarding on-line support is explored as follows:

3.1.1 Expected advantages of on-line support

Overall, most participants greeted the idea of an on-line support service for people separating with enthusiasm. Internet usage was generally very high – via desktops, laptops and smartphones in particular, as well as via tablets for some – as was comfort with searching for information on line. Indeed, although participants were not typically seeking on-line information about ‘separation’ *per se* at present (as discussed in Chapter 2) they had often previously sought on-line help or information about specific topics or questions related to separation (for example, how to set up child maintenance agreements). The internet disengaged participants were also largely enthusiastic about the idea of a web-based one-stop shop for information and advice, providing it was easy to access and use.

A range of potential benefits were mentioned regarding the general appeal of on-line provision of support around separation, including:

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- **Convenience and accessibility:** the ability to access information anywhere, as and when it was needed, without the 'waiting times' or bureaucracy associated with some face-to-face provision of support. This was considered particularly important when juggling difficult personal circumstances with the scheduling demands of family and work. On-line support is also available for all audiences, potentially supporting those who cannot access other services – for example, those without suitable friends and family to discuss issues with, or those who had difficulty or poor experiences engaging with specialist services.

"It's just easy to go on line when the kids are in bed and get information. Also, you can re-read information later when you need to; it's always there and available."

(Longer-term separated, Female, Redditch)

"You can switch on your computer and you'll get an answer. It's not 'Oh God, I've got to catch so and so before I go into work, and if I can't get through I have to phone the helpline' ... It's 24/7 ... And if you have no family it is ideal really for emotional support."

(Recently separated, Female, Birmingham)

- **Anonymity:** by removing the need for face-to-face sharing about personal circumstances, on-line support was expected to reduce barriers around stigma or embarrassment of sharing personal topics – including general conflicts in separation as well as specific concerns like domestic violence or infidelity. It was additionally raised that on-line support can be important for those who need advice or guidance regarding issues related to child welfare, but who may not want to seek face-to-face services due to fears about social service involvement. Some of the male participants were particularly keen on anonymity and felt they would be able to use on-line support much more easily than discussing their situation in a face-to-face situation.
- **Range of coverage:** unlike specialist providers (such as CM Options, which focuses primarily on child maintenance) it was expected that internet sources would have the flexibility to provide information about a wide range of topics and issues of interest.
- **Impartiality:** participants noted that they might appreciate the opportunity for objective and impartial guidance given without an 'agenda' – for example, instead of friends or family who might 'take sides'.

*"Some might say a website is a bit cold, but you can get **objective** advice on line. Friends sometimes have an agenda and are biased – you can sometimes get 'frenemies' who take your partner's side or judge you."*

(Recently separated, BME, Male, London)

- **Cost:** the provision of free information was considered particularly important for those experiencing financial difficulties during separation.

Although on-line support appealed across the range of audiences included in research, research suggests that it may have particular benefit for some harder to reach audiences, including: 1) groups struggling with stigma or peer judgment around separation or sharing personal and emotional experiences with others (for example, men, and in particular some black and minority ethnic (BME) participants); and 2) individuals in crisis (for example, people struggling with emotional impacts such as stress and depression) for whom arranging and managing face-to-face support meetings might be more difficult.

“I was depressed when all this happened and really disorganised and lost. Men don’t really like to talk to others about these things, so I looked on line. I wanted to see if other dads had experienced this, or see other single dads on-line happy.”

(Previous user, Male, Basingstoke)

“The internet and TV increases knowledge and rights ... Asian girls today are more independent ... it might not be the culture at home but they know their rights from looking on line ...”

(Previous user, Female, Birmingham)

3.1.2 Potential barriers to using on-line support

Although on-line information generally appealed, participants did voice some overarching concerns about on-line information which provide useful context regarding potential barriers that may need to be overcome to help ensure success of the ‘Sorting out Separation’ Web app. As discussed below, these included concerns regarding:

- potential lack of ‘warmth’ and opportunity for ‘human interaction’;
- the quality of information provided – in terms of the overall level of detail, the validity and correctness of information, and avoiding ‘information overwhelm’;
- anonymity and confidentiality regarding the sharing of personal information; and
- potential lack of access (for some).

The most commonly cited potential limitation of an on-line support service was the lack of **opportunity for interaction** with others. Participants noted that they viewed separation as a ‘human issue’ which required empathetic discussion, and expressed some concerns that web-based support might be a **cold or impersonal** platform to handle such an emotional topic. A personal touch was considered particularly important given the complex and difficult emotional state in which participants were seeking information, as discussed previously. They also reported that one of the benefits of face-to-face discussion (for example, with friends and family) was the opportunity to learn from others who had been through similar circumstances, both to normalise their own experience as well as to think about how they might respond to a difficult situation. Both of these were expected to be absent from on-line support services.

“I wouldn’t want to go on line and talk to someone about my relationships ... I might go on and talk about finance and how I’m going to pay my mortgage ... but the emotional side of it?”

(No children, Female, Birmingham)

Regarding the expected **quality of support provided**, there were concerns expressed that on-line information might be too **generalised**, and, therefore, unable to provide guidance and support around specific issues and problems. Participants felt that separation tends to involve complex, personal problems and situations, and were unsure how a website might reasonably include coverage of the range of issues that might occur. They raised doubts that a website could answer all of their specific needs.

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“If you’re reading stuff off the internet I always find it’s not right, there’s all the information there – all the questions all the answers – but not the questions I want.”

(Longer-term separated, Male, Bristol)

It was also raised that the **credibility** of on-line information and advice about separation could be variable; for example, those who had sought out advice or information from user-generated offerings (such as forums) found that information provided was sometimes incorrect. Furthermore, given the wide range of sites providing information and the variety of information provided, some felt it might be difficult to avoid ‘information overwhelm’ and ‘sort the wheat from the chaff’. Participants felt that if on-line support was to be trusted, it must come from a reliable source.

“It’s just an open forum and whatever you could get any Tom, Dick or Harry around saying absolute garbage ... you don’t want to think ‘I’ve got all this information, now I’m going to chase this up’ and find you’re on a wild goose chase. You want a credible source.”

(Never together, Male, Manchester)

For a minority, this concern about the credibility of information provided on line persisted even with ‘official’ sources such as government websites; for example, on-line benefits calculators were perceived as less accurate or trustworthy than in-person guidance. For participants in this group, there was a simple preference for face-to-face support.

“Even the Tax Credits calculator is never the same amount – it’s not definite – so you worry it’s a waste of time until you actually speak to someone in person.”

(Longer-term separated, Female, Bristol)

Concerns about on-line **anonymity** and the sharing of personal information on line were infrequently raised in the sample – primarily with regard to providing specific or identifying details about one’s own situation or finances rather than regarding information searching *per se*. This concern was enhanced for those with relatively lower internet confidence, and in some cases amongst benefits recipients and those with a particularly negative view about government

“They tell you to be careful about disclosing financial things over the internet because you don’t know whether they can hack into accounts or anything, so you have to be careful that it’s a legitimate group.”

(No children, Female, Birmingham)

Finally, barriers around internet **interest and access** were occasionally raised by people who lacked IT confidence or interest or had limited or unreliable access to on-line materials at home.²⁵ A minority of the sample simply expressed a general lack of interest in internet

²⁵ This research intentionally included a small number of participants who were classified as ‘internet disengaged’ in terms of internet confidence, access, or frequency of use. We found that even within this group internet and digital confidence is typically increasing, in part driven by smart phone use. However, there were some instances in the sample of individuals who expressed an overall lack of interest in using on-line information and support services of any kind. This research suggests that for this minority segment of the audience use of the Web app is unlikely, regardless of what it provides in terms of separation support specifically.

use and on-line information searching. Others raised more practical barriers – for example, some participants noted that they had a ‘family computer’ which they might not always have personal access to, either because it was in use by other family members (particularly children) or because their (ex) partner had taken it out of the home during the separation process. However, the increasing proliferation of smartphones and tablets was going some way to mitigate against any access concerns, and most of the individuals included in the research had internet access via this platform.

“I only use it to check emails occasionally and even then I’ll go weeks without checking ... I just can’t be bothered ... we’re too dependent on the internet.”

(Longer-term separated, Male, Bristol)

The following section explores participant responses to the specific concept of a digital ‘one-stop shop’ offering which offers a range of information and guidance around separation.

3.2 Response to ‘one-stop shop’ concept

3.2.1 General concept appeal

As discussed in Chapter 2, participants were typically accessing information and support around separation in a ‘silo’ fashion – seeking out specific answers to specific questions of interest in a fairly reactive and piecemeal fashion. Participants noted that they often felt confused and overwhelmed by the range of information available on line. Within this context, the overall concept of a ‘one-stop shop’ generally appealed, as a way to more simply and easily gather needed information during a difficult time. Participants were not aware of any ‘information hub’ offering around the topic of separation, and this was felt to be a potentially unique and useful offering.

“I think it’s a good idea ... there’s nothing like that out there.”

(Recently separated, Male, Bristol)

While there was interest expressed across the sample, research suggested that this type of offering would be particularly helpful for:

- 1 those with information and support needs across multiple topic areas** – for example, those with more complex circumstances as discussed in Chapter 2. These participants expected that having one site pulling a range of information together might help simplify their information and support seeking. That said, even those with relatively less complex circumstances (for example, unmarried, no children, and few financial entanglements) were still attracted by the potential for support, for example, in relation to emotional support and conflict management.
- 2 those close to the point of separation** (i.e. those who had not yet separated, were currently separating, or had only recently separated) who were towards the beginning of their information gathering stages. As discussed, given the emotional difficulty of this time a helping hand and ways to smooth the journey appealed for this group.

A few audiences in the group expressed somewhat lower initial interest regarding a ‘one-stop shop’ around separation, including teenage parents, the internet disengaged and grandparents in the sample. As discussed, teenage parents were often relying on proxies and the support of family and friends to navigate separation and were less likely

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overall to seek information independently. Grandparents in the sample were likewise less likely to perceive a need for the tool in the first instance as they thought that their own life experiences would be sufficient to advise their offspring, although, as discussed in Chapter 4, they often valued the content of the Web app once they had seen it. The internet disengaged were often more hesitant about any on-line support given general preferences for face-to-face and telephone information provision, although in some instances even this changed once they viewed the Web app.

3.2.2 Expectations and desired content

Prior to viewing the Web app itself, we briefly explored participants' spontaneous expectations and desires regarding what a 'one-stop shop' digital support service would consist of. Although these varied across the sample, participants generally expected that an offering would ideally:

- **Provide a broad range of information across the key topic areas** discussed in Chapter 2, for example, information about housing, finance, children and parenting and emotional support around conflict management – with reference to the wide range of typical situations and issues that might arise within each of these. It was suggested that the offering needed to include enough detail across the information provided to constitute a good 'starting point' in terms of information gathering and to inform next steps (for example, what to do or who to speak to in order to resolve a participants' given problem). It was also raised by some that culturally specific information may be useful – such as information about divorce and separation under Sharia law, or how to handle cultural pressure not to separate.
- **Offer some reassurance about the credibility and quality of information offered**, potentially via government hosting, with reassurance that information is up-to-date and accurate.²⁶ Some raised concerns about the accuracy and depth of material provided by charities or other non-governmental hosts, which they felt could potentially limit interest and use.

"It would have to be .gov or something similar and be someone you trust – it's got to have some backbone and credibility."

(Recently separated, Male, Bristol)

"If it has 'this site was last checked on X' you know it's been gone through."

(No children, Male, Manchester)

"I think if it was an official or government site it would give me confidence because I would know the information on there was right and properly represented."

(Internet disengaged, Female, Manchester)

- **Help users to think calmly and rationally about the range of issues that might occur** – beyond the single issue that might have brought them to the site – and how they might manage these as best as possible. Some participants spontaneously articulated that beyond information provision, a 'one-stop shop' also need to include an **explicit reminder to stop and think** about the best way to manage the situation as best as possible for all

²⁶ See further discussion of potential hosting options and implications in Chapter 5.

involved (including themselves, partners, children, etc.) – rather than simply ‘reacting’ to issues and problems.

“[Men] can’t think straight, we just do things ... I want help to cope but also that the whole situation gets better, not just me, but for her and everyone and I need help not to lose sight of that.”

(No children, BME, Male, London)

- Provide information with a **credible, but supportive and sympathetic tone** which acknowledges the difficult emotional circumstances of separation.

“You have all these different emotions ... you want something that can reassure you, something to say – actually I could be all right, I have support and I know where to go.”

(Recently separated, Female, Birmingham)

- Offer information and content via a **range of formats and materials**, with some – especially teenagers – spontaneously raising a desire for video content as well as text-based material, to reflect the existence of different learning styles and needs.

“If you are visually impaired or like listening to information on line – if you have audio you click on it and listen and get the information you need.”

(Recently separated, BME, Female, Bristol)

- **Be easy to use and navigate**, offering a ‘smooth’ experience rather than adding additional frustration or confusion to an already difficult process. Specific needs raised included a simple and clear home page, inclusion of an accurate search function, and easy to navigate text.

“Your head is in a mess and you just want to get that information. You don’t want to be trawling through pages and pages – this is happening now. I’ separated, I’m leaving, what do I do? How can I get on?”

(No children, Male, Manchester)

- **Be open access** – i.e. free to use, not password protected or requiring ‘membership’, or accessed via a gateway

“I hate when you have to give your name and set up a password.”

(No children, Female, Birmingham)

- **Provide some aspect of input from ‘real people’** – such as testimonials, ‘real life examples’, forums or chat functions – in order to gain reassurance that others have gone through the same thing.

“To hear from someone that’s been through the same situation as you... When you’re going through a break up you think you’re the only person it’s happened to.”

(No children, Female, Birmingham)

“If you’ve only just separated, you can go on and hear someone’s story and how they’ve used the website to find the information and how they’ve come out the other side.”

(Internet disengaged, Female, Manchester)

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- Potentially, **include an option to speak to experts or receive specialist guidance and advice** – for example, receiving emotional support or financial advice via a chat function or provided call line.

The following chapter explores participants' response to the Web app offering as it stands, and how this did, or not, meet the key user needs and expectations outlined above.

4 Response to Web app offering

This chapter explores participant response to the Web app offering, drawing on data from reconvened group discussions with target audience representatives as well as depth interviews with previous users.²⁷ It explores the general perception of value of the site once participants actually viewed the Web app, including which audiences perceived this to be most useful and which felt it was less targeted to or relevant for them. This includes discussion of ‘first impression’ elements (for example, name, logo, look and feel and home page design) and specific site content and language which may attract or discourage users.

Overall interest in the Web app offering was high among the general target audience as well as some more hard to reach audiences. The site was felt to be most helpful close to the point of separation and for those with more complex relationships – particularly for those with children. The range of support offered was considered useful and relevant, and the language and general presentation of the site viewed as clear and credible.

However, participants also identified a range of potential improvements that could further raise initial engagement with the Web app. In particular, it was felt that the site didn’t clearly and immediately frame itself as a ‘one-stop shop’ and make obvious the range of information on offer, or help participants to navigate through these. The level of detail was also felt to be too low at times; potentially, even if the site cannot offer ‘answers’ to all questions, it might usefully provide further detail about the kinds of issues that may occur and questions users should be asking.

Participants also included potential alterations to the title, logo and home page design, and level of detail on offer, as well as additional content that would add value. These suggested improvements were thought to optimise the Web app offer, and to help overcome any general barriers around on-line support provision around separation as discussed previously.

4.1 General perception of value

4.1.1 Overall response

The Web app was considered to be a useful resource, in that it pulled together a wide range of sometimes disparate information – providing an easy user experience around information seeking as compared to the ‘silos of support’ experience as detailed above. Participants noted that the Web app would be useful to begin information gathering and plan a course of action during the difficult circumstance of separation.

“I think it would have helped me get some basic facts – I hadn’t had a clue. It would have saved the embarrassment of the benefits office, understood tax credits, the calculator, my financial rights in terms of child maintenance and him paying the mortgage ... I just would have been in a better position, and more confident to tackle him about what I needed and what I had to do.”

(Internet disengaged, Female, Manchester)

²⁷ Responses across these two aspects of the research sample were generally very similar and are thus explored in combined fashion in the chapters to follow, with any differences between groups noted as and where relevant.

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However, participants noted that at times they were unclear about the range of support on offer, in part due to the way the site was designed and structured. Although participants felt it was very helpful to have one site which presents a range of support – therefore, helping people in crisis plan ahead and think calmly about the range of potential issues they might face – it was not always clear to them that this is what the Web app offered. Some specific reasons for this are discussed in the following chapters.

“I didn’t even realise it had all of this other information ... I was in the video and then I saw some links ...”

(Previous user, Female, London)

Overall, the Web app site was considered to be most useful for those close to the point of separation – i.e. those who were about to begin the process of separation, were mid-separation, or had only recently separated. Participants considered that this was the key ‘window’ of need for information and support; those that were longer-term separated felt that the site was less relevant and useful for them currently, but would have been helpful previously.

Likewise, those with more complex needs found the site most potentially useful overall, given that it pulled together information and guidance across a range of relevant topic areas – saving participants from searching for these separately. However, even many of those with simpler separation circumstances spoke positively about the potential for viewing information in one, combined offering.

“If I was married and had kids, I think it would have been a great help – all the information about what needs to be done with your mortgage and your kid and that kind of stuff. But just being with somebody, no kids, renting an apartment – we broke up and that was pretty much it. I guess you could go for emotional support though, if you didn’t want to talk to friends or family but you’d want an outsider’s view that could have been useful to me.”

(No children, Male, Manchester)

In particular, the site felt less relevant for those without children; although participants without children were initially positive about the concept of the site, upon viewing they tended to feel that it was heavily family-focused and, therefore, ‘not for them.’ They noted that the home page copy – and content of the opening video fronted on the home page – made specific reference to children,²⁸ as did copy throughout site sub-sections, and that the site logo felt very family oriented (see Section 4.2). These factors combined to make participants without children feel quite ‘turned off’ from the site; even though some of the website content (for example, emotional support) was relevant for them, participants thought they would miss this or leave the site before they found it.

“Everything comes back to separating with children and children’s welfare. Even the legal information – it’s a friendly argument and then they resolve it – and it’s all about children.”

(No children, Female, Birmingham)

Although some ‘internet disengaged’ participants maintained that they simply would not feel comfortable accessing information on line, most reported that despite initial hesitation they found the site useful.

²⁸ For example, ‘Start now to work out what’s best for you and your children.’

“Initially I was quite resistant – but actually in the cold light of day, if you get here and sit and read it and have it in black and white, you can keep going back to the information if you want – and it all sinks in.”

(Internet disengaged, Female, Manchester)

Likewise, grandparents in the group typically reported that although they had not previously perceived a need for a ‘one-stop shop’ on line around separation, they did value this once they had seen it. Grandparents noted that although site content was not aimed at ‘them’ because it addressed common issues that they might need to support their children on, this was not an issue. They were surprised at the comprehensiveness of the site’s contents and considered that there were many aspects of the site that they ‘knew’ about, but acted as a very useful reminder for discussion with the separating couple, particularly issues around emotional needs and recognising the children’s needs during separation that can be overlooked when dealing with practical matters such as finance and housing.

“As parents we know all of this – but it’s so easy to forget when you’re trying to talk to your child and help them. This helps you to think about what you might say to them.”

(Grandparent, BME, Male, Birmingham)

4.1.2 Harder to reach groups

Overall, research suggested that most of the ‘harder to reach’ groups in the audience had similar interest in the Web app as the general target audience members; the factors discussed above (for example, relationship complexity and family status in terms of child dependents) tended to drive interest more than ‘hard to reach’ status per se. If anything, men and black and minority ethnic (BME) respondents in particular valued the platform of on-line support given concerns about privacy and stigma when sharing personal information (as discussed in Section 3.1.1).

However, the teenage parents in the group were generally less engaged with the Web app overall. They were similar in many respects to the grandparents in that they did not initially see a need for a one-stop shop for advice and guidance, although some did feel that the Web app could be a useful source of information. However, they considered that they were much more likely to rely on their parents for guidance. Teenagers also typically found the Web app very unappealing in design and much too text-heavy for their use (as discussed in the following sections).

Despite many positive responses to the Web app, participants also noted a range of potential improvements that would boost the value of the Web app offering for them or enhance likelihood of use. Specific aspects of the site that contributed to overall perceptions of site value are explored below, including initial impressions (based on the Web app name, logo and overall look and feel), audience response to the range and the type of content offered (including perceived gaps).

4.2 Initial impressions

This section explores initial impressions of the site which may attract or potentially dissuade potential users. Initial impressions of the site were generally positive; participants felt that the site looked professional and authoritative, the look and feel was generally engaging, and on first glance the site looked relatively straightforward and easy to navigate. However, specific

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aspects of the site framing at times detracted from the perceived value for some participants – including the ‘Sorting out Separation Web app’ title and the current Web app logo. The video-fronted home page also resulted in confusion for some regarding what kind of information and support the Web app offered. The exceptions were the teenage participants. In their view the site was not aimed at them. To be attractive, the site needed far less text and a more graphical and video based offering would be required.

Further details are discussed as follows:

4.2.1 Web app name

Although not all participants were familiar with the concept of an ‘app’ or ‘Web app,’ those that were indicated that they found this name misleading upon viewing the site. Particularly given the high smartphone use across the sample, framing the offering as a ‘Web app’ generally raised expectations of a stand-alone, downloadable piece of software (i.e. something they would download to a mobile phone or desktop), whereas they viewed the ‘Sorting out Separation’ offering as a more standard website. This was not seen as a negative *per se* – rather, it was simply felt that the offering name should not raise incorrect expectations. As discussed in Chapter 5, this could be particularly disappointing for those encountering usability issues on mobile platforms such as smartphones and tablets.

“Web app is something you associate with a phone, not a computer... I thought I had to download it or something.”

(Never together, Female, Bristol)

“It’s unclear – it’s the word ‘app’. I thought it meant you were going to get it on your phone, but it came on your computer.”

(No children, Male, Manchester)

Although some expressed positivity about the ‘Sorting out Separation’ name, overall this was not seen to add value in terms of attracting potential users to the site, and often felt to be somewhat long and unwieldy. Although the potential for shorthand abbreviation to ‘SOS’ appealed as potentially ‘straightforward’ and ‘catchy’, this was missed by most participants – as it was not explicitly used or referenced in the site.

Furthermore, some participants noted that the inclusion of ‘Separation’ in the title would actively discourage them from using the site. These participants noted that given the complicated and in-flux nature of the separation process, they might not have identified themselves as ‘separating’ or ‘separated’ (or not wanted to admit this to themselves) at the point of information seeking, and so might not have thought the site was ‘for them.’

“That would have put me off straight away – I needed answers but I didn’t identify as separated at that time – even though we eventually divorced.”

(No children, BME, Male London)

“I would say you wouldn’t want a site to attract you to ‘separation’ – that’s the last thing you want to see. Oh look, when you separate you come here. I don’t want to separate, thanks. So it could be bitter, in your face.”

(No children, Male, Manchester)

Unfortunately, participants found it difficult to articulate potential alternative suggestions; there were no clear 'key words' or alternate names that emerged across the sample as framing the Web app offering more appealingly.

4.2.2 Logo

Overall, the logo was not seen to have a strong impact on participants' perception of the site, in part because it was sometimes missed (for example, as it appears at the bottom of site pages). When asked for their perception of the site logo, participants also frequently expressed confusion about whether the Web app was a government site; this was not considered to be immediately clear given the lack of explicit government or Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) branding.²⁹ Given audience interest in reassurance of information credibility for on-line support around separation, and openness from most regarding potential government hosting, inclusion of a government logo could be perceived as beneficial by some.

Response to the logo was somewhat mixed, with the strongest appeal overall from women with children. For these participants, it was felt to contribute to a welcoming first impression for the site, suggesting that content would be 'family friendly' and relevant to their needs. Many also felt it was non-gender specific (as the 'parent' in the logo is not obviously male or female) and, therefore, fairly inclusive, although the pink and purple colouring was thought to be relatively feminine.

"This looks so feminine – I thought it probably wasn't for me."

(Recently separated, BME, Male, London)

However, the logo was strongly off-putting for some participants. Participants without children noted that upon viewing the logo they would likely immediately assume that the site was 'not for them'. In the context of arguments about child maintenance or visitation, some also felt that it was unrealistically positive or noted that it raised unhelpful associations.

"It's like my ex is laughing at me, with my child on her shoulders."

(BME, Male, Birmingham)

"I don't identify with this at all – look at this website and you will be a smiley, happy family? Really it should be about helping you take a step in the right direction ... Not that everything is going to turn out great."

(Recently separated, Female, Birmingham)

4.2.3 Look and feel

At the point of testing, the Web app was embedded in a range of host sites, with some aspects of site colouring varying from host to host. Differences in look and feel were also noted across different platforms (for example, desktop versus mobile access). Look and feel, therefore, varied somewhat across the course of the research.

²⁹ This may have been potentially exacerbated by the lack of a gov.uk or otherwise obvious government site hosting. See Chapter 5 for additional considerations regarding hosting and the potential impact of various hosting options.

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Overall, the response to the general look and feel of the site was neutral or weakly positive – neither strongly inviting nor discouraging use. The look and feel was considered to be appropriately professional looking and, therefore, credible. Although participants noted it looked fairly ‘standard’ rather than particularly ‘modern’ or ‘exciting,’ it was also noted that ‘bells and whistles’ were not necessarily necessary or desirable given the subject matter.

“It’s formal – it’s not having fun.”

(Longer-term separated, Male, Bristol)

“It’s a serious site, right? So you don’t want it to be all – colours everywhere! It’s fine.”

(No children, Male, Manchester)

The variation in look and feel across sites or platforms, as noted above, was at times considered confusing for those that viewed the site in multiple locations across multiple viewings. It was noted that it could lead to confusion as to whether users had come to the ‘incorrect’ site at times.

4.2.4 Home page design and layout

Some participants noted positive impressions of the site design and layout based upon initial views. They felt it looked fairly straightforward to navigate, which suggested the site would be easy to use.

“It looked pretty user friendly and fool-proof. You could just scan and see what was relevant for you.”

(No children, Male, Manchester)

However, the dominance of the video on the home page sometimes made it difficult for users to determine what the site was offering; textual content, including tabs for issues-specific support (for example, Housing, Finance, etc) was sometimes missed, as was signposting and other information towards the bottom of the page. As we discuss in Chapter 5, this often led to navigation and use difficulties. Critically, it also often resulted in a missed opportunity to immediately establish the ‘one-stop shop’ offer as participants weren’t exactly sure what kind of information and support the site provided.

“You have to look at the video – you don’t have the option to do anything else.”

(Internet disengaged, Female, Birmingham)

“It’s really unclear – the videos should be secondary to the information – you don’t know what you’ll find in terms of information because the website’s been a bit pushed down.”

(No children, Female, Manchester)

Although this problem was often resolved as participants worked their way through the site, the Web app home page may, therefore, benefit from some adjustment in order to more clearly signal the range of content on offer – and in doing so to begin to help participants consider the range of issues they may need to consider and think through.

Participant response to Web app content is discussed in the following section.

4.3 Web app content

Research explored participants' experience and views of the information and support provided by the Web app, in terms of the range of information included, the level of detail provided, and the overall language and tone used to deliver it. It additionally explored specific views of the videos and Action Plan sections of the site. Participant responses to these issues are discussed below.

4.3.1 Range of key topic areas

Overall, participants were very positive about the range of issue areas covered on the site; these resonated well with the informational needs they had spontaneously identified around separation, and there were not considered to be any key gaps in terms of overarching subjects. Including the current full range of subjects was considered highly useful.

"It was literally like we'd just made it up ourselves – all the (topic areas) we broke down. It's the way you want it to be."

(No children, Male, Manchester)

There was not considered to be any one area of 'key information' across the sample; as discussed in Chapter 2, information and support needs were dependent on personal circumstance. However, tips on relationships and conflict were almost universally considered helpful given that this was a 'common factor' in separation, regardless of relationship complexity.

"I liked the tips on avoiding conflict – I 'screen munched' those and added it to my favourites."

(No children, Female, BME, Manchester)

In-depth interview participants often noted that this range of content appealed even though they had originally visited the site to gain information and support regarding one specific question or issue area (for example, Child Maintenance). This initial issue served as a 'hook' to get them into the site; once inside, they were pleased to see that help was available across a range of other areas as well.

"I came from CM Options because of a leaflet, but I looked at the whole site – all the information on housing and emotions – and watched all of the videos. It was very very useful, and I went back to read it again later too."

(Previous user, BME, Female, London)

However, participants did raise some concerns about the kind and level of information provided across these key topic areas, as explored below.

4.3.2 Signposting and level of detail

Participants understood that even a 'one-stop shop' could not be all things to all people, and noted that they did not expect the Web app to answer all of their specific questions and concerns. Using a combination of website copy and signposting to external sources was considered a useful and reasonable solution to the challenge of providing general guidance that was still useful for individual users facing different circumstances.

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However, participants often voiced frustration regarding the overall level of detail directly provided on the site before signposting users to other organisations. They felt that there wasn't enough direct information provided, which could result in a feeling of being 'passed off', and often strongly reduced engagement with the site overall. This was particularly in relation to more complex topics such as benefits, the legal aspects of separation and specific housing issues such as joint mortgages and rental agreements where the information provided was considered to be far too basic.

"It gave brief descriptions but then it directed me to other websites – there wasn't enough information. It feels like passing me off, like getting on the phone and having to press one, press two."

(Internet disengaged, Female, Manchester)

Given the impossibility of providing **answers** across all the issues around separation that may occur, research indicates that one potential solution would be provide further detail around the **range of issues** that might come up and the **questions** that users should be asking themselves about what they should do next.

For example, participants noted that within the 'homelessness' section fairly little information was provided before the Web app provides signposting to local authorities and charities such as Relate and the Citizens Advice Bureau. Many participants (particularly men) in the sample had experienced temporary homelessness and that they would not have found this top-level signposting very helpful. However, they noted that they would have appreciated general guidance about how housing assessment processes work. They also reported that they would have liked it if the site prompted them to think about the practicalities of arranging support; for example, it was noted that single men would be unlikely to qualify for government housing aid above 'higher need' users, and if they had known about the length of assessment processes and waiting periods they would have prioritised exploring other options.

"It's no use to just tell me – talk to the local authority. It wasn't like that. I waited for ages and spent time and went two or three times and then you get a list and then they say – there's no chance, you're a single man, we have women with children who will take priority. If I'd known that I wouldn't have gone through all that ... It should say – do you know what your options are? You probably won't get council support and it will take a long time, here's other things to consider."

(Recently separated, BME, Male, London)

4.3.3 Offering gaps

Participants also noted a range of content 'gaps' and information that they would have liked to see included. This included:

- more relevant information for users without children;
- additional 'human' elements and the opportunity for interaction with others, for example, via a forum, chat room, or even inclusion of stories and testimonials from previous users;
- among some BME participants, information about Sharia law, and how to handle cultural stigma around divorce, and cultural pressure (for example, within some Asian and African communities) not to separate;

- some aspect of personalised content or way to navigate the site in a tailored way, given the range of information on offer (see Section 4.3.5 for more details);
- reassurance regarding confidentiality and anonymity of use;
- clarity regarding whether or not the site was government provided, and if so the reasons for doing so.

“I suppose DWP just wants to help support people, which is fine – but they just need to say that. Otherwise you wonder what their motives are. Are they seeing if I should owe more child maintenance?”

(No children, BME, London)

In addition, some participants raised gaps regarding specific content that they would have liked to see included. This was particularly true for the longer-term separated, who expected that they would likely be searching in response to specific single needs rather than seeking more general guidance and information.³⁰

“I know a lot of this – when I visited the site I wanted information on rights about school choices if the two of you live in different places”

(Longer-term separated, Female, Ascot)

No other unique issues were raised in terms of needs according to user sample group (for example, Never Together, Teenagers, Internet Disengaged or Grandparents).

4.3.4 Language and tone

As discussed previously, the stressful, complex and emotional context of information seeking around separation indicates an enhanced need: 1) for easy to read information around separation; as well as 2) sensitivity in terms of the tone taken by support services. We discuss participants' thoughts on language and tone as follows.

In general, the site was praised for its overall clarity and ease of reading. The language used was universally considered to be straightforward; no participants noted any words or content that they found difficult to read or understand. This included lower-Socio Economic Group (SEG) participants in the sample and younger (for example, teenage parent) participants.

“Even a child could read it... there's no jargon. It's simple, no beating around the bush.”

(Never together, Male, Manchester)

“I wasn't bamboozled with big words.”

(Recently separated, Female, Birmingham)

However, the teenage participants were generally put off by the amount of text and said that if they came across the Web app independently they would not read it. Their preference was for a site that used a more graphic approach – such as story boards and cartoon strips – together with a greater use of videos.

³⁰ As specific information gaps were fairly disparate across the sample these have not been included in reporting.

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Participants' response to website tone was generally positive; they described it as 'user friendly,' 'business like', 'professional' and 'quality.' The Web app was also considered to have an appropriate mix of formal and informal language; most sections (for example, those providing legal and factual information) took a tone that was perceived as credible and informative, but aspects of the site were also perceived as more conversational (for example, the tone of questions in the Action Plan).

"It's formal in sections, like you would associate with other government sites or charities. And then informal when it asks you how you feel ... more personalised. [The tone] is good."

(Never together, Female, Bristol).

However, participants also raised aspects of tone that may be off-putting or fail to resonate, primarily regarding the video content. This is discussed in the following section.

4.3.5 Video content

As discussed, all participants were generally positive regarding the inclusion of video material in the range of information formats on the site, especially the teenage participants. Video was viewed by some as 'easy to digest' and as beneficial for users with alternative learning styles or limited time. The video length was generally praised as appropriate and user-friendly, long enough to provide some useful information, but not so long as to be boring.

Additionally, participants felt that the Web app videos partially answered their needs for 'real life' content and a human element. They appreciated the opportunity to learn from others' experiences around separation and hear stories about how separation issues played out over time.

The use of the child's voice to narrate the videos resulted in a mixed response. Many found this 'annoying' or 'manipulative' and reported that this device made them 'tune out'. The child's voice particularly did not resonate for participants without children, who reported that they might simply turn off the video and leave the site if they heard it. However, in the depth interviews some participants showed a strong emotional response to these.

"That actually made me a little bit teary – you forget about your kid watching you there yelling and screaming – I feel so guilty – what is this doing to her?"

(Previous user, Female, London)

Participants also noted some general disappointments with the video offerings, and suggested key potential improvements that they felt would enhance the value of video content.

Participants' key complaint was that the videos felt 'unreal', which could reduce their credibility for some users, although the teenage participants were more likely to consider the video scenarios as very natural. They felt less able to relate to the use of actors than the use of 'real people'. Many also found the tone of some videos unrealistically 'positive' or 'happy, both in terms of the tone of voice used by the adult actors and in terms of the focus on 'happy endings.' Particularly in videos featuring a couple, it was felt that there may be a need to include more anger or conflict in order to reflect real-life circumstances of users – and, therefore, to retain credibility. Participants noted that they could relate to the inclusion of angrier tones in some videos.

“The stories are true but not the way they are portrayed – it is not very realistic, things don’t end up that perfectly. It’s just not always that rosy, with fairy tale endings.”

(Recently separated, Female, Birmingham)

In order to address this concern, participants raised that they would like to see ‘real people’ (i.e. non-actors) in the videos speaking about their own experience. The possibility of user-generated content was raised, as was more minimal adjustments such as simply stating ‘based on a real life story’, or making it clear that the actors involved had all been separated themselves.

A few other issues were also raised sporadically across the sample, including:

- some desire for signposting to any mentioned information (for example, a deed of separation);
- some perception (more from men) that ‘the woman always wins’ and men are not shown positively;
- some perception (primarily by BME participants) of over-representation of ethnic minorities,³¹ who were sometimes felt to be shown ‘in a poor light.’

“I can see what they’re trying to do – include everyone. But there seems to be a lot of blacks, Asians in these videos. Perhaps they [government] think we are more likely to separate, I don’t know.”

(Longer-term separated, BME, Female, Bristol)

4.3.6 Action Plan

As discussed previously, participants indicated some interest in ‘tailored’ information as a way to navigate information and advice around separation. Participants noted that depending on the complexity of their separation, and the unique issues they faced, many aspects of the site might not be relevant to them; for example, those who were not married would be less interested in legal guidance regarding divorce or dissolution of shared mortgages.

However, there was a general feeling that the Action Plan was not an ideal way to provide tailored information in its present form, and that the name ‘Action Plan’ raised unrealistic expectations. This title drove users to expect a concrete ‘to do’ list or ‘checklist’ rather than the general signposting that the tool outputs provide, which could cause some frustration. Participants felt that rather than offering a ‘plan’ it instead just offered another way to access the site.

Additionally, there was some perception that the questioning was inappropriate in tone or content; in some cases questions felt ‘obvious’ (for example, around suicide), so participants felt they were being patronised rather than supported. They felt that as long as the range of information available was obvious and easy to access, they were capable of knowing what kind of support they needed.

“Samaritans for suicide is patronisingly obvious. Why did you have to ask me all these questions? I know if I’m suicidal.”

(Longer-term separated, Male, Bristol)

³¹ We note that representation was actually lower than participants’ perceived; this may suggest that sensitivity around this issue was particularly high.

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Finally, participants raised occasional frustrations regarding the length of individual questions, and the length of the questionnaire in total.

Alternatives raised for a way to navigate the site in a more tailored way included an initial 'sifting' question, or tabbed sections, according to some key relationship status issues (for example, whether you have children, are married, own a home together, etc). Alternatively it was suggested that the site might take a more event-oriented approach, providing information in relation to common situations – such as 'I've left the home – what next' or 'I've been refused access to my kids'. However, it was also recognised that although there are many commonalities in terms of experience around separation, it may be difficult to provide content across the wide range of situations that may occur. Research would suggest that a modified home page which simply and clearly lays out the types of information on offer (as discussed in Section 4.2.4) may go some way towards helping users navigate the site more effectively.

5 Web app accessibility

This research suggests that making the Web app as accessible and user friendly as possible will be critical to its success. As discussed in Chapter 2, people typically seek support around separation in a haphazard and ‘silo’ fashion, which presents challenges as to how to ensure the site is accessible when, where and how audiences need help. Separation is also a disruptive event, and potential users of the Web app are typically seeking information within a context of stress and upheaval; a ‘smooth’ user journey will be important to help engage users and avoid ‘turning off’ people who could benefit from support.

In this chapter we discuss considerations regarding the Web app:

- 1 **Access and hosting** – including the ways in which users are likely to find and access the site, potential implications for how to reach potential users, user experience of current Web app ‘hosting’, and user considerations for ideal hosting.
- 2 **Platforms for use** – including levels of interest in the range of potential platforms, perceived benefits and downsides of these, and likelihood of use, and
- 3 **Navigation and usability** – providing initial indications regarding the user experience of site navigation and ease of use.

5.1 Access and hosting considerations

The following section explores how users accessed the Web app, and considers the impact of various site hosts and ‘embedded’ display within these.

5.1.1 Accessing the Sorting out Separation Web app

As discussed earlier (Chapter 2), separating individuals tend not to search for information about ‘separation’. Rather, they look for information about a specific topic, such as housing, child maintenance, or financial support, and often in an unstructured and piecemeal way.

“For me it was like when it all came down to the legal aspect of the house. The mortgage and everything. Then I would have gone to something like this ... Because I left [unclear] my ex-partner. I wasn’t looking for something like this until the selling of the house came.”

(Separating without children, Male, Manchester)

Where participants had searched for ‘separation’ through a search engine they noted that they often located solicitor’s websites rather than the type of information they were looking for. None noted having found the Web app through this kind of general search.

Given this tendency not to search for ‘separation’ as a unified category, it would seem more appropriate to provide links and recommendations from places where separating couples are most likely to be looking for information – both in terms of on-line and in-person support services. For example, this might include signposting from government partners and service providers (for example, local authority, housing benefit, child maintenance and National Health Service (NHS) staff) and relevant websites (such as Child Maintenance (CM) Options and others). Encouraging government partners to mention the Web app on their sites would also drive people towards it. Face-to-face promotion may be particularly important to reach internet disengaged groups and grandparents, who have lower interest overall in on-line

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support around separation, but often do value the site once it has been viewed. Reaching grandparents may be particularly helpful in accessing the teenage parents audience, given evidence that this group is less likely overall to be seeking information and support on their own around separation and instead rely on 'proxies' like family members.

There was some evidence in depth discussions that once the Web app had been viewed by the target audience, they would engage in word of mouth recommendations to others. Several participants had recommended the site to others. However, they noted that they'd needed to provide the exact URL in most cases, as general searching did not currently bring up the site.

5.1.2 Hosting the Sorting out Separation Web app

Experience of current hosting options

At the time of drafting this report the Sorting out Separation Web app was hosted on a stand-alone website and embedded in a number of other sites, such as CM Options, Mumsnet, Gransnet and the Families need Fathers site. As part of the research exercise we provided participants with the name of the Web app, but not the URL and asked them to see if they could locate it. Although participants were frequently able to locate the main CM Options hosting site, they found it extremely difficult to locate on other embedded sites.³²

During the reconvened sessions we conducted an on-line web surf with participants to explore their reactions to the Web app, typically exploring it on the host site that was most relevant to the audience (for example, for mums we used Mumsnet, for grandparents we used Gransnet, for audiences whose main needs centred around child maintenance we used CM Options, etc.) as a means of gaining an insight into the impact of a stand-alone versus hosted provision.

It was noticeable that the Web app was often very difficult to find on the embedded host sites with virtually no signposting to it. Using the hosting sites search tool often failed to locate the Web app. In some cases the Web app appeared to be hosted on a page that was not directly linked back to the host site. Once the Web app had been found on the host sites, participants could not see any clear benefit in these hosting arrangements. Overall, there was some concern about having the Web app hosted on a range of different websites, particularly in terms of whether the topic coverage would be exactly the same and whether the sites would all be updated at the same time. Many participants also had little familiarity with the range of host options other than CM Options, particularly men and grandparents in the sample.

In order to minimise confusion and ensure that the Web app was comprehensive, up-to-date and easily accessible, there was a general strength of feeling that there should be a single website that hosted the Web app with links from other sites to it, rather than being hosted on a myriad of different sites. Potential options for this are explored as follows.

³² All of the previous user participants in the depth interviews sample had viewed the website on CM Options rather than other hosts. However, this was largely a factor of sampling methods; only two individuals in the depths sample were included via general web advertisements across the range of embedded host sites, with the other 14 being drawn from a survey of CM Options users.

Preferred site host

Overall, views were split between government hosting and charity organisation hosting; government sites were overall considered to offer more credibility (a key concern around internet support, as discussed in Chapter 3), although they ran the risk of disengaging some audiences. This is discussed in more detail below.

Those in favour of government hosting thought that not only was it the Government's role to provide this type of support, but also that the website was more likely to be accurate and up to date. The downside, however, was a concern about privacy, confidentiality and the potential impact on any benefits claimed, especially if the Web app had to be accessed through the Government Gateway.

'See, I see the Department for Work and Pensions as like the Government, like the taxman, if you know what I mean, so I don't want the taxman knowing my personal information.'

(Recently separated, Female, Birmingham)

"I would run a mile if DWP provided a site like this. People would be worried if DWP got hold of your earnings or [National Insurance] NI or such – you know, people might want to show their earnings. They might just prefer to give their ex cash."

(Longer-term separated, BME, Birmingham)

By contrast, charity organisation sites or other sector organisations such as the NHS were seen in a positive light as they were seen to be more 'caring' than government and would, therefore, host a more empathetic version of the site. There were also far less concerns about providing any personal information, privacy and confidentiality. However, the downside was that charities may have resourcing issues and so the Web app may not be kept up-to-date. There was also some concern about which charities might host the Web app. While Relate, Samaritans and CAB were all suggested, not all the participants were aware of these, especially the younger participants in the research. These concerns were reinforced by those who had used the Web app before – and interviewed in depth – with the additional concern that it was difficult to tell how authentic the facility was when it was hosted on another organisation's website.

There was some discussion about the Web app being hosted on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) website. For some this gave rise to issues of privacy, others could not see why a department that was concerned with work and pensions would be hosting a facility concerned with separation. Others were wholly enthusiastic as it would ensure authenticity.

'[DWP] that would be great. It would be ideal ... because that is who should be responsible for that, it's all the benefits ... It would have to be a .gov ... have to come from a reputable source ... it is someone you trust ..., it's got some backbone if you like ... Credibility.'

(Recently separated, Male, Bristol)

The CM Options site was often not recognised as being a government site and there were very few concerns about hosting the Web app on this site. When it was revealed that the CM Options site is a government site there were few concerns expressed. If there was no requirement to enter any personal information into the site, then participants appeared quite happy for the CM Options site to be the host site.

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Overall, given concerns about credibility of site content, research would suggest that ideally the site either be stand-alone – with some sort of confirmation of government sponsorship – or appear via a government website (such as CM Options). However, it may be useful to provide a statement of anonymity and confidentiality of use (for example, to reassure users that no information about them is collected) and, if hosted via the DWP directly, to provide some sort of ‘statement of intent’.

5.2 Platforms

The Web app was generally accessed using a personal computer, laptop, smartphone, or, to a lesser extent, a tablet. Searching for relevant information was undertaken in a range of different situations. Some of the participants indicated that they would allocate time to undertake a web search, such as during a lunch break or after work. Others might need information at a moment of crisis. Others did not always have access to a PC or laptop when they needed it but would be able to use a smartphone. Many of the teenage single parents in the study indicated that while they could access a PC or laptop through a friend or family member, and they mostly had their own smartphones which would be the easiest way to access the Web app.

With the significant rise in the use of smartphones and tablets, there was a real desire to be able to access the Web app across all platforms – PC, laptop, tablet and mobile (Android, Apple and Microsoft operating systems).

‘I think you’d get more response from an app because of the way the technology and the world is today everybody from a ten-year-old in [Unclear] school to people my mum’s age who’s nearly 60. They’ve all got smartphones, they’ve all got apps.’

(Separating without children, Female, Birmingham)

At the time of drafting the report, there were some usability issues for mobile platforms; for example, participants reported that the text tended to be very small and the videos did not always play. Should the Web app be rolled out for use of smartphone and tablets, there was a real desire for it to be fully functional and possibly be a downloadable app that was accessible at any time and readily updateable.

5.3 Navigation and usability

The key aim of the research was to explore the value of the Web app in terms of its content for couples that are separating. However, during the web surfs it became apparent that there were some issues with the overall navigation and usability of the Web app that limited its usefulness and could act as a barrier to its use, especially for people in a crisis situation and needing information urgently. While the research did not comprise a full usability test of the Web app we discuss below some of the issues that arose as participants were evaluating the facility.

Experiences of using the Web app were mixed: those accessing the Web app on a PC or laptop generally found it easy to navigate although it was apparent that it did not operate

properly with older versions of Microsoft Internet Explorer³³. Viewing the Web app on smartphones tended to be more problematic as the text was very small. In addition, some versions of the iPhone software would not run the videos that are embedded in the Web app.

In terms of navigation and generally usability there were a number of common issues:

- As discussed above, while the Web app segmented the content across a number of topic areas – which made information potentially easy to find – fronting the current home page with a video meant that many interviewees missed the key topic areas and text. This was especially so on small format devices such as tablets and smartphones where the page becomes scrollable;
- The Web app was designed to have one scrollable page within another (due to the ‘embedded’ nature of hosting). With some browsers it was difficult to see the white scroll bars and so much of the content was easily missed, or frustrating to navigate around.
- The Web app’s ‘browse’ function was generally missed by users. Users were also unsure what it meant.
- While the ‘search’ facility was considered to be potentially useful there was a view that it had yet to be optimised as it did not find the site’s Action Plan when users searched for this directly.
- There were varied and recurring issues about how the Web app displays across platforms, browsers and browser versions that needs to be corrected for optimum use. This includes text that was too small to read on smartphones, lettering that did not adjust in size when the browser was zoomed and words that were cut off on the right hand side of the page (in some older browser versions).

There was a considerable strength of feeling that if the Web app did not function properly, or that navigation issues limited its usability, people would quickly resort to other sources of information. Full usability testing would be helpful to ensure it is as useful as it can be and does not present barriers to people who may require information quickly or who have little experience in using internet-based facilities. In order to meet the key function of being able to identify the topic areas of relevance to users, we additionally recommend that the home page is redesigned to reflect a ‘big picture’ map of the topics and issues that face a person separating from their partner.

³³ It should be noted that we did not specifically test the Web app with different web browsers or versions of web browsers. Where participants had difficulties these were noted.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions from this research

Seeking information and support around separation

- Separating individuals have a wide range of needs across a variety of key topic areas. Needs tend to occur within a context of high stress and complex emotion. Individuals often find it difficult to identify their full range of needs and consider these in a calm or reflective fashion, think ahead to future issues and situations that are likely to occur, or consider how they may manage these successfully.
- Information and support tends to be most critically needed at the early stages of separation – indeed, often before individuals are even sure they are separating or identify with the status of ‘separation.’ Individuals at early stages are likely to have a wider range of support needs, although longer-term separated individuals also desire information upon changes in circumstances. Support needs tend to arise via ‘critical events’, driving respondents to seek for information in a piecemeal and reactive way from ‘silos of support.’
- Separating individuals reported use of a wide range of support sources, including friends and family, Government organisations, charities, and professionals such as counsellors, solicitors and health professionals. Informal networks of support consisting of family and friends tend to be the first port of call, and on-line support tends not to be top of mind when people consider sources of information and assistance – although these are used and valued. Research indicates that there is a window of opportunity for on-line support methods given recognised barriers around informal supports (for example, regarding credibility of information and concerns about privacy and embarrassment) and more formal support sources (for example, around convenience and access). On-line support may be particularly beneficial for some more ‘hard to reach’ audiences (for example, men and black and minority ethnic (BME) individuals) or those who are particularly concerned about sharing private information around separation.

Appeal of the Web app concept

- Overall, the target audiences – including many in the ‘hard to reach’ categories – were generally positive about the possibility of accessing support via an on-line ‘one-stop shop’ service. This was due both to general positivity about the potential benefits of on-line support around separation, as well as a perceived need for a ‘one-stop shop’ specifically to help users navigate the wide range of material available on line.
- Perceived benefits of on-line support included: the potential to provide a wide range of information; accessibility and convenience; anonymity and private access of support; and the provision of impartial information. On-line support was seen as overcoming some key disadvantages of other support services as outlined above, for example, in terms of privacy concerns and convenience of access. There were suggestions this may be particularly important for men in the sample as well as some BME audiences facing particularly strong stigma around separation.

- However, participants also identified a range of potential barriers to use that the Web app may need to overcome, including concerns about: potential lack of ‘empathy’ and a ‘human element’; poor information quality in terms of breadth of detail and correctness of information; and confidentiality and privacy risks when submitting personal information on line. Some user groups may also be less initially positive about on-line support provision overall, including grandparents (who are less likely to perceive an immediate need for support around separation) and the internet disengaged (who have more concerns about the lack of a ‘human element’ and for whom on-line materials are least top of mind).

Response to the Web app offering

- Interest in the Web app was generally high across both the target audience and many harder to reach groups. The ‘one-stop shop’ approach to gathering information across a wide range of issues and topics appealed most to individuals close to the point of separation, and to those with more complex needs and relationships – particularly those with children. There was also evidence that it could be of value to other users as well, although some modifications may be required.
- However, some of the harder to reach groups were overall less engaged with the Web app, including teenagers (who generally were not seeking information around separation to the same extent as other groups, and preferred a less text-heavy approach). Other audiences who found the Web app less relevant at present included those who were longer-term separated (who tended to already know most of the information provided) and those without children (who found the site too family-focused for their needs).
- The range of support offered was generally considered useful and relevant, and to be presented in a clear, professional and credible way. The combination of website copy and signposting to external sources of additional information was considered to be a reasonable way to provide general information of interest to all. However, there were concerns that not enough detail was provided on the site itself, which could disengage users – and call into question whether the site really offered a ‘one-stop shop.’
- Additionally, the range of information on offer was not clear to many users, nor was there considered to be adequate design and prompting to encourage consideration and reflection about the range of issues that may be relevant to them and how to manage these. There is, therefore, some risk that without taking the opportunity to help users map out their needs, the site could simply perpetuate a ‘silos of support’ approach – as users simply use it to find signposting for key individual issues, and exit the site.
- Participants also identified a range of potential improvements to further engagement and add value. Some of these included adjustments to enhance initial impressions of the site (for example, in terms of home page design, look and feel, logo and offering title) and avoid discouraging some audiences. Participants also expressed some need for reassurance around confidentiality; inclusion of ‘interactive’ elements such as forums; other ‘human elements’ such as testimonials. A number of navigation and usability issues were also raised which discouraged use or made users feel that the site was not appropriate or easy enough to use to be valuable, as discussed in the section below.
- The inclusion of a range of contents was considered beneficial, with video content in particular being valued by teenage parent audiences, those who appreciated the ‘human element’ of storytelling, and individuals with literacy issues or more visual learning styles. However, there were some frustrations raised about a perception of ‘unrealistic’ video tone, particularly related to the ‘happy endings’ employed and the use of actors.

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- Although there was interest in personalised content or assistance in navigating the site information in a more tailored way, the Action Plan was generally not thought to be working well at present.

Access and hosting considerations

- Participants noted that they would be unlikely to find and access the site via a general internet search, both because they were not currently looking for 'separation' information *per se* and because the site was not perceived as search engine optimised at present. It was considered necessary to either search for the full Web app title directly or to be signposted from other sources.
- The range of host sites were not perceived as adding value. It was often difficult to find the Web app embedded in sites themselves, users sometimes became confused about the variety of look and feel options across host sites, and the 'embedded' nature of hosting often led to navigation and use difficulties. Where users had accessed the site via a host (typically CM Options) this often also led to confusion about who was offering the site.
- Participants had accessed the site via a range of platforms; there was perceived to be benefit in it being freely available across a variety of platforms and operating systems. However, there remain a wide range of usability and navigation issues depending on the platform used and the type and age of browser. Usability was noted as particularly difficult on mobile platforms.
- Additionally, participants noted a wide range of usability and navigation issues, particularly related to the home page fronting of video content; scrolling and website use in embedded sites; lack of video functionality on some platforms; and size and layout of text display on mobile devices.

Impact and use

- Although research was not explicitly intended to explore the impact of the Web app amongst previous users, it was noted that under real-life conditions many had found it useful and relevant. Some participants noted that they had 'saved' or 'printed' information for further reference, discussed materials with partners or other support sources, or recommended the site to others.

6.2 Recommendations

Marketing the Web app to potential audiences

- In order to reach the target audience, the Web app is likely to have to be directly marketed (for example, signposted) from other face-to-face and internet support sources where people are already searching for support – for example, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) tax credits, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits, local authority housing, Child maintenance (CM) Options, and National Health Service (NHS) health professionals and websites. Ideally, the site should also be search-engine optimised across key words related to 'silo searching' (for example, 'housing', 'benefits' and 'child maintenance').
- Although the range of 'host' sites were not perceived to be adding value via 'embedding' the site, direct signposting to the Web app may nonetheless be useful. However, signposting needs to be more visible and prominent than at present.

- On initial viewing, users were often unclear about the purpose of the site and the range of information it offers. There is a missed opportunity to ensure that users: 1) access the full range of materials relevant to them; and 2) are prompted to reflect on their situation; 3) engage with the range of issues they may face; and 4) develop initial strategies to manage these well or seek further information they may need. This could potentially be mitigated by altering the home page design to clearly display the range of information on offer and invite users to consider what is most relevant to them, and by providing more explicit framing about what the site is meant to do – potentially via a ‘mission statement’ or short simple introduction on the home page.

Site framing

- The site title should be changed to avoid raising incorrect expectations (that it is a downloadable ‘Web app’ or disengaging some audiences (who do not identify with the use of the word ‘separation’). If the site intends to engage male users and those without children, the logo also requires adjustment.

Content and level of detail

- Although the site overcomes many initial hesitations around on-line support provision, it may add value to additionally: 1) provide reassurance around the confidentiality and anonymity of site use; 2) clearly establish the credibility of information on offer via clarifying that the information is government supplied; and 3) include more interactive elements such as forums, chat rooms or testimonials. Chat rooms or forums in particular may be useful in order to help users explore more **specific** issues and needs that it would not be possible to address in the main (more general) website content.
- Participants raised frustrations around the low level of detail provided by the site itself prior to signposting. Given the impossibility of providing specific information to respond to all user needs, research suggests it would be useful to focus additional content on **mapping the range of issues that may take place and the questions that users may need to ask themselves now and in the future**. This should recognise and acknowledge realistic problems around separation – both in terms of the messiness and unpleasant emotions involved for those separating, and in terms of potential problem points around the solutions and support. The site will lose credibility if it is perceived as offering unrealistically positive solutions or does not acknowledge real-world situations.

Hosting, navigation and usability

- Ideally, research suggests the site should appear via a stand-alone web page rather than embedded on host sites in order to: 1) establish a clear and distinct brand, avoiding confusion between the offering and host sites; 2) minimise navigation and usability issues; and 3) establish credibility. Overall, research suggests that government hosting would be beneficial, as long as people do not have to enter any personal information, assurance of anonymity is provided, it is not hosted via the Government Gateway, and government intentions around offering separation support are made explicit.
- Ideally, the site would benefit from full usability testing to ensure ease of use across the full range of potential platforms, particularly mobile devices. Research indicates that mobile internet use was high in the target audience, overcoming potential access concerns around laptop and computer availability, and particularly likely to be used in moments of critical need.

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Engaging harder to reach audiences

- In order to engage BME audiences and men particularly, the site should: 1) include culturally-specific content such as information around cultural stigma and Sharia law; and 2) avoid negative portrayals of BME individuals and men given their high sensitivity about how they are portrayed.
- Research suggests it may not be advisable to focus efforts on trying to attract teenage parents to the site, given that these groups have very different needs than other audiences in terms of information format and overall design, and are more likely to use 'proxies' to gather information rather than search independently.
- If there is interest in engaging individuals without children, the site would need significant revision to the logo, video content and general site copy to avoid perceptions that it is too 'family-focused' to be relevant.