



Sorting Out Separation Web app: Evaluation of effectiveness

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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 online provisions of separation support, and understand specific views of and responses to the Sorting Out Separation Web app.

This research was carried out **between February and June 2013. The findings and recommendations, relate to that period of time.** They are 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.

Main findings

Separating individuals have a wide range of needs across a variety of key topic areas. Their needs tend to occur within the 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 for 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 online 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). Online 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 online 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 online service around separation must also 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 online.

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 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 offered. There is a missed opportunity to ensure that users: 1) access the full range of materials relevant to them; 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 online 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 standalone 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.

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.

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.

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You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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