Department for Work & Pensions

Reducing Parental Conflict

A digital discovery

June 2019

Contents

Ministerial foreword

Addressing the critical issue of parental conflict and improving the lives of those children who are most at risk of experiencing this, is of great importance to this Government. This is because children's emotional and social development can suffer where there is frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict between their parents. They become more likely to experience worse long term outcomes, including their educational attainment, mental health, and their future employment chances.

Digital services play an important role in making support on a wide range of issues accessible. We know that families are making use of the flexibility made possible by the internet and mobile phones to access support, which is why it's so important that we learn as much as possible about how these services might work best.

I'm very excited about this user research, which has looked into where parents in low-income and workless households go online for help and what digital support they need to reduce parental conflict. This has given us new insight into opportunities for us to provide better digital services, through innovation and strong partnership working. By learning from and building on these findings, we will ultimately help to improve outcomes for children.

We are already building on this evidence through a number of projects funded by the RPC Challenge Fund. These projects are being delivered in partnership with digital and relationship support specialists who will test the recommendations in this report. One project will test ways of engaging parents on social media that they already visit and provide a one-to-one chat service focused on reducing conflict in the relationship with their partner. Another project will test the effectiveness of online storytelling structured around behavioural modelling techniques in engaging parents who are already, or are at risk of being, in conflict.

The projects will build on the initial learning to get a better understanding of what parents need when they access digital support and what works to engage them to reduce parental conflict. The further learning from these Challenge Fund projects will inform future policy and service development.

I hope that our colleagues across government and within other organisations put the findings in this report to use, as they continue to shape and improve digital services for parents in low-income households.

Will Quince MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance

Glossary

Term	Definition
Addictive behaviours	Repeated involvement with a substance or activity, regardless of harm to self or others (which may or may not be acknowledged by the individual) because the involvement is pleasurable or considered to have personal value for the individual.
Agile / Agile methodology	An approach to software development under which requirements and solutions evolve through the collaborative effort of self-organising and cross-functional teams and their customer/end user.
Challenge Fund	Grant funding released by DWP in 2019 for innovative projects to gather learning on what works to reduce parental conflict digitally and for families where the children face other disadvantages.
Child maintenance	Support to help pay for children's everyday living costs when parents separate.
Digital	A system in which information is recorded or sent out electronically.
Digital initiative	The successful digital proposal from bidders to the Challenge Fund.
Digital Strand	The Digital Strand of the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) programme in DWP.
Discovery	The process of agile user research and developing findings from interviews with parents and the Landscape Gap Analysis.
Domestic abuse	Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over (who are or have been intimate partners) or family members regardless of gender or sexuality.
Family based arrangement	A private way of arranging child maintenance with no set rules and no government involvement.
Gamification	'Rewarding' positive behaviours with elements of gaming in a digital initiative.

Landscape Gap Analysis	Desk-based research of material that has already been published.
Low income families / households	Families / households with an annual income under £20,000.
Parents, mothers, fathers	Also includes individuals other than biological parents who have caring responsibilities for children e.g. step-parents, adoptive or foster parents.
Parental conflict	Destructive behaviours between parents, including aggression, non-verbal conflict or the 'silent treatment', lack of respect and emotional control and lack of resolution. The RPC programme provision is for parents experiencing conflict below the threshold of domestic abuse.
Programme	The DWP's Reducing Parental Conflict programme.
Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)	SEO involves a range of practices, including taking into account a target audience's online behaviours, used to improve rankings (the position of a single result).
Social listening	Social listening tools monitor social media networks for mentions and user responses. Depending on initial set up, these tools can provide user feedback on sentiment and impact as well as analytic data for SEO.
Target audience / group	The wider audience of the Reducing Parental Conflict programme: low-income, workless households experiencing parental conflict.
User needs	An expression of a target audience's goals, values, thought processes and sometimes aspirations commonly developed from face to face research with end users.
Workless household / families	The resident(s) / family members (age 18 and above) is / are not in paid work.

Executive summary

Introduction

1. The government wants every child to have the best start in life and recognises that parents play a critical role in giving children the experiences and skills they need to succeed.

2. Children who are exposed to frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflict can suffer a decline in their mental health and experience poorer long-term outcomes including their educational attainment and later employability thus limiting their chances to lead fulfilling lives.

3. The government is committed to reducing conflict between parents - whether they are together or separated. Sometimes separation can be the best option for a couple. But even then, continued co-operation and communication between parents is better for their children.

4. This is why the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) programme has been developed, backed by up to £39m, to equip and encourage councils and their partners across England to integrate support and approaches which address parental conflict into their local services for families.

5. The way we live our lives is changing – families want to use the flexibility made possible by the internet and mobile phones to access support on a wide range of issues. The RPC programme is exploring what support can be provided digitally to help parents identify and manage conflict in their relationships earlier than they might otherwise when relying on face to face services.

6. We have taken a user-needs led approach to understanding more about the online behaviour of mothers and fathers in low-income households, experiencing parental conflict. We have investigated where the parents we have interviewed go online and what digital support they need to reduce parental conflict.

The report

7. Within this report we have included findings from a Landscape Gap Analysis and our own user interviews on how parents from low-income / workless households use the internet, and where they go online, particularly to address parental conflict.

8. The findings in this report are split into two sections. We have identified four specific user needs that focus on information and support for parents in low-income households experiencing parental conflict. These user needs may be of interest to people working towards reducing parental conflict, whether this in the digital space or not.

9. The report also highlights recommendations on what could be considered when developing digital support for this socio-economic group of parents, to test what works to engage and re-engage them online. Whilst we are particularly interested in parents' online behaviour to reduce parental conflict, these findings may be of interest to anyone who would like to learn about what works to engage parents from low-income/workless families online (regardless of the subject matter).

10. This report is intended as a starting point to encourage other organisations to use Agile methodology to build and learn from the initial findings.

The research

11. Our research was undertaken as part of the discovery phase of an Agile project and it has included:

- gathering data from interviews with parents and family support workers and from questionnaires completed by parents (all parents we interviewed were from low-income or workless households)
- a Landscape Gap Analysis (LGA) based on an online literature review, published statistics and data from technology commentators e.g. Ofcom and Flint reports. A list of some of the sources reviewed as part of the LGA are included in Appendix 6.
- the LGA also included:
    o a readability study of online material on reducing parental conflict
    o an accessibility review of online material on reducing parental conflict

The findings

12. The findings, from the LGA and the user interviews we held, tell us that mothers and fathers from low-income households, who are experiencing parental conflict, do go online. In the main, they are confidently accessing social media (for example Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger) to communicate. They prefer videos to long articles and are more likely to engage and re-engage with trusted and recognised brands (the parents we interviewed mentioned brands such as children's charities and trusted government websites and for social media mainly online and TV celebrities).

13. From the parents we interviewed, we learned that they are not typically going to established webpages for parental conflict advice and information. Parents found it difficult to define search terms for issues relating to parental conflict and, therefore, they did not always find the relevant information that was available online.

14. This is a key insight that we want to share which may also have application outside parental conflict space. By delivering digital help where parents already go online and addressing what they need (rather than signposting or re-directing to websites and apps) could be critical to engaging this target group in the future.

15. The graphic below shows how personal factors (such as relationship quality and life experiences) and external factors (such as financial stability and public

services e.g. benefits) interact within the wider parental conflict landscape. The growth of social media, such as Facebook and Instagram (which depend on users producing content), along with the rise of technology such as Google (predominantly being the search engine of choice) and smartphones for on-the-go access to the internet, means that digital plays an important role in the lives of mothers and fathers and could present opportunities to engage with them about the conflict in their relationships.

Digital technology (including social media) contributes to the reducing parental conflict landscape

Recommendations which will inform the digital approach within the Challenge Fund

16. As part of the Reducing Parental Conflict programme we are using a Challenge Fund to build a more complete evidence base about what works digitally to help families reduce parental conflict.

17. So that we could learn from our early findings about what works to help parents access online support, we asked for potential bidders of the RPC Challenge Fund to work in partnership (digital specialists and relationship support specialists). We

asked potential bidders to consider the following points when developing their proposals:

Helping parents to access online support

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) strategies	We need to test the best approach to capturing parents' online attention.
	Any SEO Strategy should ensure that reducing parental conflict (RPC) material / support is consistently in the top 5 of popular search engine results (Google was favoured by all of the users we interviewed).
	SEO should include social media.
Readability	Online content should reflect the Government Digital Service guidance which designs material for a reading age of 9 years. This will promote accessibility for our target audience by avoiding 'heavy text' based content.
Accessibility	GDS standard minimum (AA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) as a minimum).
Devices	RPC material / support should be accessible on a smartphone as well as all other devices.
Place RPC material where our target group go online - do not expect users to go searching	Social media – particularly Facebook and YouTube and signposting to forums via Google searches (if relevant).
	Material in online places linked to child-related issues (because this is what parents search for first).
Be flexible (Agile) in approach - target audience includes those with low literacy and digital skills	If the material is not maintaining engagement, and any corresponding online user journey, it should be developed further to increase user engagement.
	Deliver evidence of flexible (Agile) approaches to meet changing user needs from project start to end:
	• meet user needs according to GDS principles and so demonstrate on-going impact / success • be flexible to target our audience's online searching strategies (e.g. analytics and on-going user need feedback)
Role models and trusted online 'brands'	Review the importance of role models and consider building a recognised brand (e.g. following on Instagram / Facebook) and recognised / trusted images (e.g. children's charity websites use faces of

	children) as a means to engage, attract and retain the target audience for RPC material.
Peer support / expert advice on the go and 'gamification' principles	Consider promoting online user engagement / interactions with RPC material as the target audience frequently demonstrated high interest in peer group support / advice (if moderated) and expert advice (professionals). Social media with interactive on-the-go/'gamification' element, for example rewarding positive behaviours for engaging using 'tick' symbols, similar to online shopping experiences. Gamification here is not about creating online gaming rewards.

Addressing parental conflict: parents' needs

18. From the interviews with parents and family support workers we identified specific needs (themes) around information and support required for parents to address parental conflict. We want to test whether addressing these needs could support parents.

Issue	Parent needs identified
Understanding what parental conflict is	As a parent, I need: • to understand when we are in conflict as a couple • to understand that my partner may think about parental conflict in a different way to me • to understand that parental conflict may cover a wider range of behaviours than I think it does • parental conflict 'material' presented in a way that makes sense to me • parental conflict 'material' to be in places where I go online for other things that matter to me • to understand that what I learned in my past doesn't have to influence my present
Handling parental conflict	As a parent, I need: • to understand that the way I deal with conflict can drive further conflict • to understand that my children are learning from me about to how to deal with conflict

	• to understand what addictive behaviours are and how my addictive behaviours can impact the long-term future of my children • to understand that my mental health can impact my family as well as me
Conflict triggers and multiple issues	As a parent, I need: • to understand that conflict in relationships may not have a single cause and / or a single solution • to understand how my behaviours can add to parental conflict • to understand how parental conflict has wider implications for my children, my partner and other family relationships
Parenting when separated	As a parent, I need: • to understand my on-going obligations when agreeing to a family-based arrangement • to understand my on-going obligations around the contact arrangements agreed for my children

Introduction

The case for change

19. The government wants every child to have the best start in life and recognises that parents play a critical role in giving children the experiences and skills they need to succeed.

20. DWP's report Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families[1], published in April 2017, highlighted that children who are exposed to frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflict can suffer a decline in their mental health. This can lead to them experiencing poorer long-term outcomes including their educational attainment and later employability thus limiting their chances to lead fulfilling lives.

21. Where a child lives with both parents in the same household, more than one in ten (11 per cent) of children have at least one parent who reports relationship distress.[2] Children living in workless families are three times more likely to experience parental conflict than in families where both parents are in work.

22. We also know that only 52% of children in separated families see their non-resident parent regularly[2] (that is, at least fortnightly during term time). Regular contact tends to be associated with reasonable relations between parents.

23. The Government is therefore committed to reducing conflict between parents - whether they are together or separated. Sometimes separation can be the best option for a couple but, even then, continued co-operation and communication between parents is better for their children.

24. Intervening early to reduce parental conflict and improve inter-parental relationships can help to avoid a range of costs for local and national services, but we know that evidence-based support to reduce parental conflict is not always available to families locally.

---

1. [1] DWP (2017) Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696368/improving-lives-helping-workless-families-web-version.pdf.

2. [2] DWP (2018) Parental Conflict Indicator 2011-12 to 2015-16: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/692327/parental-conflict-indicator-2011-12-to-2015-16.pdf

The Reducing Parental Conflict programme

25. This is why the government have introduced the Reducing Parental Conflict programme, backed by up to £39m, to encourage councils and their partners across England to integrate services and approaches which address parental conflict into their local services for families.

26. The Reducing Parental Conflict programme aims to:

   - ensure evidence-based interventions are more widely available to improve children's outcomes
   - support local areas to embed parental conflict support in wider services for families

Digital opportunities

27. The way we live our lives is changing – families want to use the flexibility made possible by the internet and mobile phones to access support on a wide range of issues. We are interested in learning how we can engage parents digitally to help them identify the impacts of parental conflict, and help them digitally, to positively address the conflict before the need for more traditional and costly face to face services. We aim to do this by strategically influencing the digital market by investing in digital innovation.

28. As part of an Agile project, in the 'discovery' phase, we have taken a user needs led approach to understand more about the online behaviour of parents in low-income / workless households who are experiencing parental conflict. We have investigated where parents go online and what support they need to reduce parental conflict.

29. This discovery has focussed on:

   - a Landscape Gap Analysis of published data on the current online behaviours of parents in low-income households
   - interviews with mothers and fathers and a small number of family support workers to investigate user needs (during September to November 2018) as set out in the Methodology of this report

Who we are aiming to support

30. We intend to provide access to digital support to all families with a particular focus on addressing the needs of parents from low-income households (with an annual household income under £20k) and workless families.

Objectives of the discovery

31. The objective of the discovery was to explore the user needs of low-income families who are experiencing parental conflict. This is critical to understanding the nature of the support required.

32. Responding to user needs is critical in determining any digital support provided for families experiencing parental conflict. If there is not a clear user need identified, resources could be wasted providing services that do not get used by the intended audience.

33. To build our understanding of the needs of parents as potential users of digital support, we interviewed parents who had previously experienced or were experiencing conflict in their relationship at the time. This helped us to understand their experience, identify key challenges and explore any support they may have already received.

34. Our findings will inform our work and future policy development by helping us to start to understand the following about mothers and fathers in low-income households experiencing parental conflict:
    - their online information-seeking behaviours
    - whether they have the necessary digital skills to discover existing online content around parental conflict
    - what digital offerings engage or disengage them
    - their preferred online sources and channels
    - if they recognise that parental conflict can impact their children and / or other family members

Methodology

35. We carried out user research into our target audience's digital needs to add context and insight into the process of designing online support to reduce parental conflict.

36. Our User Researcher, Catherine Fox, has 17 years' experience working as a User Researcher and Ethnographer. Catherine has training as Ethnographer, an Anthropology BSc. and a Human Computer Interaction MSc with Ergonomics.

37. We identified parents for interviews through our contacts in Family Centres and by using a recruitment agency. We used a strict recruiting screener (Appendix 3) to ensure that, to meet our policy intent, the mothers and fathers we selected for interview were from our target group of low-income or workless families experiencing parental conflict.

38. A breakdown of the methodology we used can be found in Appendix 4.

Summary of sources of information

Landscape Gap Analysis

39. This concluded in a report collating data from technology commentators and studies. The research was conducted in August 2018 and was based on an online literature review collating published statistics and other data from technology commentators e.g. Ofcom and Flint reports. A list of some of the sources we reviewed can be found in Appendix 6.

40. Through this data we gained an understanding of current provision and the potential barriers to accessing parental conflict content online. The LGA also included:
    - a readability study of current online material on reducing parental conflict
    - an accessibility review of current online material on reducing parental conflict

Parents and family support workers – interviews and questionnaires

41. Data from 77 individuals was collected and analysed. This included:

    - 18 x 90-minute face to face interviews with individual mothers and fathers experiencing parental conflict
    - 9 x telephone interviews (20 to 60 minutes) with family support workers (working with the Troubled Families programme in Family Centres)
    - 50 x paper questionnaires completed by parents using free childcare at Family Centres (Barnsley and Newcastle)

How we recruited parents to take part

42. Parents were recruited using a screener to ensure the individuals selected met user research and programme requirements. The individual parents recruited did not include both parents in a relationship or former relationship.

43. Parents were recruited via two sources:

- a market research agency using a recruitment screener
- parents using services delivered in Family Centres

44. Interview locations included the Barnsley and Newcastle Family Centres and the Department of Work and Pensions Usability Laboratory in Manchester. Barnsley and Newcastle Family Centres volunteered to help us organise interviews with parents from low income households who go online and who had or were currently experiencing parental conflict.

45. All recruited parents self-identified as experiencing or having previously experienced one or more of the following triggers for parental conflict:

- Debt
- Sex and intimacy
- Health and disability
- Communication
- Parenting
- Separation

46. The mothers and fathers recruited for the discovery research were as follows:

- gender: 5 x men; 13 x women
- relationship: 15 x opposite sex couples; 3 x same sex couples
- employment: 8 x unemployed (6 workless households), 6 x full time (low-income), 4 x part-time
- income: all average household incomes under £20K
- status: mix of 4 x married, 6 x co-habiting, 6 x separated, 1 x separating, 1 x divorced
- health / disability: 9 x disabled (physical, mental health or learning needs)
- inclusion: 3 x mixed ethnicity including black and mixed race participants
- children: the parents interviewed were responsible, across the interview population, for 37 children

Semi-structured interviews

47. A series of semi-structured, face-to-face, interviews were conducted with individual mothers and fathers who were experiencing or had experienced parental conflict. A supporting discussion guide (Appendix 2) ensured that similar research themes were consistent across the interviews.

48. The interview consisted of two parts:

- semi-structured interview (60 plus minutes)
- an online searching task (20 to 30 minutes)

49. In the second half of the interview, parents were asked to use a device of their choice (the devices on offer were an iPhone, iPad, MacBook, desktop computer, or their own device). One person chose to use the iPhone we provided and everyone else used their own smartphone – this was unprompted. They were asked to search online for parental conflict based content. The aim of the search task was to understand a parent's decision-making and cognitive thought processes when seeking information online including content related to reducing parental conflict.

50. Each parent was asked to define their own search terms to look for content relevant to his or her current relationship issues. The parent was observed during the task and then questioned about their online experiences using open-ended questioning techniques.

51. Protocols for the discussions with parents can be found at Appendix 1.

Family support worker interviews

52. Nine telephone interviews were conducted with family support workers based in Family Centres (working within the Troubled Families programme) in Barnsley, Newcastle and Leeds. The interview length varied between 20 minutes to 60 minutes.

53. Family support workers were a valuable source of information and we interviewed them to gain insight into their wider experience of working with families experiencing parental conflict. They helped us to gain an understanding of what role digital can play in supporting families from their professional perspective.

Questionnaire

54. Questionnaire data was gathered from mothers and fathers using free childcare at the Barnsley and Newcastle Family Centres in October and November 2018.

55. 50 questionnaires were completed by parents while attending Family Centres. Findings from the questionnaires reinforced findings from the interviews with parents and family support workers and the Landscape Gap Analysis.

Research Gaps

56. This report documents findings from the Discovery research to date (February 2019). We acknowledge there are gaps in the qualitative research which could be addressed in follow up research e.g. further contextual interviews with men, additional ethnic groups and possibly LGBT parents (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender).

Using insights to understand and develop user needs

57. The Government Digital Service (GDS) promotes cross-government standards for government online services using 18 criteria[3]. These standards are based on discovering and developing services around the user needs of target audiences.

58. In line with GDS standards, high-level user need statements are identified in this report to bring together the findings and inform the digital support which may subsequently be developed.

59. During the interviews, parents were clear about what support they preferred and needed from digital services. Individual user needs statements were produced from a cross section of insights as a means to illustrate higher-level user needs and these statements are evidence based.

60. The user need statements are not intended to be a complete set (statements are at high or 'epic' level). They are presented in a descriptive format.

61. The next stage would be to use these statements in an Agile environment where the user needs can be further refined and acceptance criteria set as the digital support is developed. It is recommended that any digital provider supporting the programme should not see these user needs statements as definitive but continue to develop additional user needs using qualitative and quantitative research methods as recommended by GDS.

62. A table summarising the user needs derived from this research is included in the recommendations chapter of this report.

Voice of the user

63. This report includes quotes from the interviews. The intention is to help the reader understand the mind-set of the end user. Quotes in this report are predominantly verbatim however, for the purposes of clarity and to ensure anonymity, some abridged quotes are included.

---

[3] Set of 18 criteria for government online services https://www.gov.uk/service-manual

Assumptions – the target groups online behaviour

64. The findings from the Landscape Gap Analysis helped us to make some assumptions about the skill level and ability of parents from low-income families in using the internet. These assumptions were a means to benchmark what we thought we knew about parents in low-income families experiencing parental conflict and they helped to structure our interviews to find out more.

65. After completing each interview, we discussed the assumptions and used a grid to note whether or not we thought the assumptions had been confirmed.

66. You can see the completed grid and brief comments for each assumption explaining our decision in Appendix 5.

The findings: How parents access online support

67. This chapter covers the key findings of the Landscape Gap Analysis (LGA). We have also used quotes directly from the parents and family support workers we interviewed that support the findings from the LGA. We asked potential grant participants of the RPC Challenge Fund to consider these findings when developing their proposals. The chapter is structured to show:

- What **the LGA demonstrated** – This has been split into the four key questions.
- What **parents told us** – The LGA findings are reinforced by what parents and **family support workers told us**.
- **Our findings** – Including an explanation or summary. There were some clear findings that have ultimately been woven into our final recommendations.

68. During the Landscape Gap Analysis (LGA) we considered four key questions to identify online trends, explore the target group's user behaviour and the technology they are using. We used desk based research into published data to learn more about the online behaviours of different socio-economic groups. This led us to focus on addressing the questions below for parents in low-income families in the interviews with parents and family support workers.

69. The four questions considered as part of the LGA were:

1. How can we better target online families in low-income households?
2. Online behaviours: how do low-income families use / search the internet?
3. Digital platforms and devices: where do low-income parents go online and what devices do they use?
4. Digital innovation to reduce parental conflict: what is happening in the digital market?

Question 1: How can we better target online families in low-income households?

The LGA demonstrated:

70. Online content, language and readability levels should make sense to the target audience

71. UK Consumer Digital Index study (2018)[4], reported that 11.3 million UK adults have limited or no basic digital skills, which include:
- managing information e.g. using a search engine to find information or a previously visited website
- communicating e.g. sending an email message
- transacting e.g. purchasing items online
- problem solving e.g. verifying online sources of information
- creating e.g. completing an online form and including personal details

72. 90% of limited and non-internet users have the following common indicators[5]:
- work status excluding retired people, 19.2% of non-users were not working / looking for work, 21.8% of limited users were not working / looking for work.
- low household income 44.5% had a total household income of less than £11,500

Parents told us:

"Some of these [Google results] sound like scams. The way it's worded. I'll log on and it'll say join this and you can earn X. I'm a slow reader. I don't mind reading online - but this is a lot of words."

[Father, co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

"I've not been confident with spelling since school. I wouldn't ask for help. One teacher used to get me up to read in class. I stuttered. Kids laughed. I'd get frustrated. I can understand why my son gets frustrated."

[Mother, married, opposite sex relationship]

Our findings:

73. The findings from LGA and interviews with parents suggest that to better engage families in low-income households, material or content which forms part of the RPC programme's digital strand should:

- provide for a reading age of 9 years (as per GOV.UK digital standards)[6]
- ensure that text based information is short, concise and not text 'heavy' so readers can understand and take on board the information

---

[4] UK Consumer Digital Index study (2018)[4]
https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/LB-Consumer-Digital-Index-2018-Report.pdf
[5] Ofcom Report 2017: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/adults-media-use-and-attitudes
[6] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk

- be optimised for smartphone use and not use high amounts of data to access
- follow simple clear design practices e.g. include headings, bullet points, short paragraphs and checklists
- ensure legal accessibility requirements are met

Question 2: Online Behaviours: How do families in low-income households use / search the internet?

The LGA demonstrated:

74. Google is the dominant search engine worldwide and that Google Chrome is the most popular browser worldwide across all devices including mobile.[7]

Parents told us:

"I always go to Google because I just trust it. I tend to stick to the same website. I tend to go and stay in my comfort zone."

[Mother, separated, opposite sex relationship]

"The way I weigh up the advice [online] is that the NHS is quite good. It is good for research and you can trust it because you know it's a certified web address."

[Mother, separated, opposite sex relationship]

Our findings:

75. We found that the Google search engine and Google's Chrome mobile browser were used by all the parents we interviewed to access and browse the internet using their smartphones. This is in line with the findings from the LGA that highlights Google as the search engine of choice. This was true even when the smartphone had an inbuilt iOS search engine – this was only used to 'find' Google, not to browse.

76. The parents we interviewed used Google searches on their smartphones to visit online spaces that were trusted or familiar, for example:
    - parenting forums (e.g. Netmums and Mumsnet)
    - professional organisations and charities e.g. NHS sites, children's charities for autism and ADHD

---

[7] w3schools.com https://www.w3schools.com/browsers/

- council websites

77. Internet forums are online discussion websites that enable individuals to post and view messages. The parents we interviewed would visit forums if a discussion post was featured at the top of a Google search page and appeared relevant to their search intent. However, posting on a forum requires signing up with an email address and, consequently, parents only viewed discussions and did not post comments.

78. Through the course of discovery interviews, we found the primary reason for mothers to undertake a Google search was to look for information to support their children's needs. Searches our parents undertook included:

- professional advice for autism and ADHD (NHS sites and children's charities were favoured)
- physical concerns (e.g. bedwetting)
- legal information (e.g. child maintenance, contact / custody, mediation)
- peer information / support / advice (e.g. commonly Facebook discussion groups and Mumsnet forums)
- physical and mental health (e.g. local and NHS services such as Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS))
- local services or entitlements (e.g. school dinner entitlement / schooling issues, council services)

79. All the parents we interviewed struggled with search intent – defining their keywords used for searching. In addition, none stated or demonstrated that they bookmarked or saved online content

80. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) strategies will help users to find information quickly by ranking information favourably in Google search results. Information can also be placed where target users already go – for example in social media networks.

81. None of the parents had previously used a Google search to look for relationship advice or information about parental conflict. The majority struggled with search intent. Many stated that they 'didn't know where to start' and were not confident about their digital skill levels when searching for unfamiliar topics.

82. During the interviews two search strategies were prevalent:
    - long tailed (three or more keywords) descriptive searches, for example, 'How do I get my controlling ex out of my house', 'Mental state in a relationship'
    - ill-defined or unfocused searches, for example, 'debt free', 'relationship and resentment'

24

83. When the parents we interviewed were invited to undertake a 'relationship' focused search online, it immediately returned millions of search results - which overwhelmed most parents. A Google results page predominantly listed links to blogs and articles hosted on websites with which the parents were not familiar.

84. Parents we interviewed found it difficult to engage with the text heavy content presented in the blogs and articles and when navigating unfamiliar websites; particularly where the websites were not optimised for smartphone viewing. Most parents superficially viewed blog and article content before selecting another search result. Featured Ads on results pages were generally ignored and some parents commented they didn't trust adverts. Adverts for counselling providers such as Relate were ignored.

85. When the fathers we interviewed searched on Google and YouTube, they were heavily focused on employment and debt resolution. The websites (and YouTube videos) offering debt advice were treated with suspicion and the results displayed for local employment offerings were viewed as limited or unsuitable.

86. Some of the parents interviewed felt that the results returned from their Google and YouTube searches were not directly applicable to their situation and so were reluctant to explore the results. They did not feel confident that they could amend their search terms to return more relevant results and most chose not to continue at this stage of the search task.

87. We found that the parents we interviewed did not respond favourably to any digital offering that required higher-level digital skills or the inputting of personal information, for example apps that require downloading and registration. Parents were often suspicious of any online form or email registration. They preferred to remain anonymous online and didn't want to register or sign in to view online content.

88. The LGA findings prompted us to question parents on how they searched online. On analysis of the parents we interviewed, we observed that all struggled to search for relationship-related content online. We recommend that digital support to reduce parental conflict is placed where parents go online. This means that future RPC programme digital initiatives should strongly consider:

   - the use of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) strategies to ensure that parents who are online, but with low digital skills, can find material when undertaking searches.
   - We also recommend that those SEO strategies optimise pushing material into social media platforms.

Question 3: Digital platforms and devices: Where do families in low-income households go online and what devices do they use?

The LGA demonstrated:

89. That smartphones are the device of choice for internet use (over laptops, desktops, tablets, etc.) not only by low-income families, but by all economic groups. This is an important finding as there can sometimes be an assumption that people in low-income families do not have access to smartphones.

90. Although low-income families have access to smartphones, they may not have a large data allowance.

91. In contrast to more affluent social economic groups, low-income families tend to undertake a narrower band of online activities, and do not generally browse the internet.   Much of their time online is spent on social media networks accessed via their smartphones. We know from a 2018 demographics report[8] that lower socio-economic groups favour social media networks. For example, 74% of lower socio- economic groups use Facebook.

One parent told us:

"I use Google for everything. I go on Instagram, use WhatsApp and Facebook, and then go on YouTube to look for games for my autistic daughter or listen to music. Sometimes, I might buy something for the kids from Amazon."

[Mother, recently separated, opposite sex relationship]

A Family support worker told us:

"Number one is phones to get online and then tablets. There's a mixture of 'pay as you go' [PAYG] and contracts depending on what their income is. If they have the money they can top up with PAYG."

[Family support worker]

Our findings:

92. Our findings from the LGA and interviews with parents suggest that smartphones are the main device for accessing the internet. The LGA shows us that this is a growing trend across all social-economic groups, including the programme's

---

[8] (https://www.slideshare.net/weareflint/uk-us-social-media-demographics-2018-88015084)

target audience, and family support workers confirmed this. Many parents did not own or regularly use laptops or computers. If available, computers and laptops were more favoured by the children in a household.

93. Smartphone models were often the latest generation as low cost contracts and PAYG ('pay as you go') enable the purchase of newer models with little initial outlay. iPhones were the most popular followed by Samsung. Some individuals did not have an internet connection at home and were solely dependent on 4G (wireless internet access) via their smartphones.

94. From collated questionnaire and interview data, we can see that the primary reasons for preferring smartphones were:

- convenience
- enable 'on the go' digital access
- easy access to social media networks
- affordable
- easy to use for online shopping
- easier than a computer
- provides access to other media (e.g. streaming videos)

95. When online, the parents we interviewed did not commonly explore outside their 'comfort zones' and stayed within a narrow band of activities and relied on smartphone apps for internet access, for example:

- social media networks (Facebook and Instagram)
- shopping (Amazon and eBay)
- online banking (some limited activity)
- online betting

96. Social media networks, predominantly Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, were the most favoured online places and used regularly by our target group using smartphones. Social media networks are interactive internet-based applications that provide real time online services which:

- connect people via their online profiles to other people or groups
- enable communication between individuals or groups
- encourage 'following' so that the profile content of an individual or group is public within the social media network
- facilitate the uploading / downloading and sharing of user generated content with others e.g. posts, photos, videos, comments, reviews, sharing etc.

97. All social media network apps are highly optimised for smartphone use.

98. Messaging apps on smartphones such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Snapchat were favoured over emailing. Many of the parents we interviewed did not have serviceable email addresses and family support workers confirmed this.

99. Videos were appreciated by parents especially if the videos were short and snappy (due to data download restrictions). The video images (known as 'thumbnails') and video descriptions next to a YouTube result were influencing factors in deciding whether to view a video. Videos with thumbnail images and descriptions highlighting celebrities, experts, health professionals and relationship guru videos, such as 'Doctor Phil', were preferred.

100. Most parents had not initially viewed YouTube as an online space to go for relationship advice. However, this is not a concern as internet technologies enable YouTube hosted videos to be pushed and promoted (through SEO strategies) and viewed in other social media networks (such as Facebook).

101. Based on our findings from the LGA and the interviews we conducted, we can see that low-income families are predominantly using social media and are using smartphones to go online. We recommend that future RPC programme digital initiatives strongly consider:

- that all material is suitable for smartphone viewing, with low data requirements
- that the use of social media networks is optimised - users in the social media space who 'like, share and follow', are more likely to re-engage with the digital support on offer

Question 4: Digital innovation to reduce parental conflict: What is happening in the digital market?

The LGA demonstrated:

102. Google trends demonstrated a high interest in searches for relationship advice. A typical 'relationship advice' type search could return 100,000s of results, across a saturated market. This included apps, websites and blogs dealing with personal therapy, dating sites, 'fun' relationship advice, etc. To find specific or relevant content, the parent would have to develop sophisticated search strategies – which is potentially a challenge for our target audience.

Interviews with parents and family support workers demonstrated:

103.   Parents in low-income households engage with positive messaging and action based advice

Parents told us:

"I use Instagram and follow people that follow someone called mother of daughters, she's a midwife and I follow her because she's like a real mum. I follow people like a well-known body coach. He has just had a baby and is an involved parent…he is a good role model"

[Mother, separated, opposite sex relationship]

Our findings:

104.   Our findings from the LGA, and the interviews with parents, suggest that the parents are influenced by certain online brands and role models (including celebrities) featured within social media networks, particularly those concerned with children, parenting and some relationship advice (primarily Facebook and Instagram).

105.   When viewing either text based content or videos, parents stated that they liked a mixture of input from 'real people' as well as 'experts' (defined as, doctors, psychologists, relationship gurus)

106.   Mothers responded positively to real-life stories posted by other mothers in forums and videos. They were also attracted to content and videos where the subject matter was focussed on children's needs (health and challenging behaviours) and parenting. For mothers, online content concerned with children's needs are a 'hook' and a potential opportunity to introduce new information about parental conflict and its impact.

107.   Parents, particularly mothers, were very responsive to online content about relationships and parenting that:

- provided practical and actionable advice
- made them feel good / positive
- did not criticise

108.   Some family support workers acknowledged that online materials, such as videos, were already being used as 'teaching aids' in their discussions with families. Barnsley Family Centres reported they had developed a substantial resource library that included videos sourced by individual family support workers.

109.   Family support workers using digital services underlined the target audience's preference for positive messaging and action-based advice. The specific methods and approaches mentioned included:

- utilising Prochaska's wheel of change[9] which helps parents document changes in behaviour
- the online materials included in parenting programmes such as Solihull Approach[10]
- specific videos hosted on YouTube dealing with children's challenging behaviours and autism
- providing information to mothers on how parental conflict could impact the brain development of very young children
- signposting to other online programmes such as the Solihull Approach (parenting programme) and to local services

110.   Content that criticised or laid blame was quickly by-passed by parents we interviewed. In addition, videos containing distressing or upsetting content (such as those dealing with aggression in relationships or hostility towards children) were not well received and visibly upset some mothers.

111.   Family support workers cited cases where smartphones were acting as drivers for conflict between couples. They gave examples of having to advise couples about how to reduce their levels of 'arguing' using Facebook posts and texting.

112.   Gamification provides a sense of fun by adding in positive 'rewards'. Social media is particularly good at rewarding engagement. For example, in certain social media networks a reward is given when users 'like' content by the use of the thumbs icon up icon. Similarly, gamification can occur when content is shared or commented on.

113.   Based on the findings from the LGA and from the interviews we undertook with parents and family support workers, we can say that the parents we interviewed were influenced by brands and role models and are more likely to engage and re-engage where the principles of gamification are used. We recommend that future RPC programme digital initiatives strongly consider:

- developing trusted expert brands
- utilising 'gamification' principles which positively reinforce interaction and participation
- creating content that can be accessed 'on the go' (low data download requirements for smartphone users).

---

[9] http://socialworkpodcast.blogspot.com/2009/10/prochaska-and-diclementes-stages-of.html
[10] https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/Programme/the-solihull-approach-understanding-your-childs-behaviour

- using positive messaging and easy to follow step by step actions

The findings: addressing parental conflict - user needs

114.   By analysing the interviews with parents and family support workers, we have identified four user needs / themes which, if addressed, could facilitate the development of engaging digital support for our target audience of low-income or workless families earlier in their experience of parental conflict. These themes are not exhaustive but were the ones repeatedly identified throughout the interviews. They are the themes we want to test, learn and build on during the next phase of developing policy to use digital interventions to reduce parental conflict.

115.   In this chapter, the user needs are identified and are expressed as 'As a parent, I need', followed by quotes from parents and family support workers and then an overview of the findings in relation to that user need. This is essentially our evidence base for our recommendations.

User need 1: As a parent I need to understand what parental conflict is

As a parent I need:

- to understand when we are in conflict as a couple
- to understand that my partner may think about parental conflict in a different way to me
- to understand that parental conflict covers a wider range of behaviours than I think it does
- parental conflict 'material' presented in a way that makes sense to me
- parental conflict 'material' to be in places where I go online for other things that matter to me
- to understand that what I learned in my past doesn't have to influence my present

Parents told us:

116.   It's important to highlight that, although parents made the following comments throughout the interviews, they did not recognise this as experiencing parental conflict.

"(My partner) will moan she can't do x, y, z but won't get up and do anything for herself. If you mention it she's on the defensive. The only solution I have at the

moment is ducking. None of this fits my box because I am hand to mouth you know. Except the obvious, getting a cheque for fifty thousand pounds, I don't know what the path out is."

[Father, divorced, currently co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

"My partner and I are mostly just snappy. It's not like we live in a house where we are always shouting. Never in front of the kids… the baby might be there sometimes but we send the kids upstairs."

[Mother, recently separated, opposite sex couple]

"I've never had a decent partner. I have had things done to me several times before and I thought how many times am I going to do this."

[Mother, separated, same sex relationship]

"So with mum and dad, if she dared stand up to my dad about his affairs, he'd kick us out, call us names. He threw us out lots of times, left us on the cold shoulder."

[Mother, separated, opposite sex relationship]

"I have made bad choices, being young and naïve. I fell pregnant within the first four weeks of meeting J. It was really bad. The police were involved. Then I was single for a few years and then met M, who was so good with my son. I thought a great candidate for having children. But that was another joke again. Now I am on my own and I am very focused on my kids."

[Mother, separated, same sex relationship]

"Yes it is live and learn and you do get a bit paranoid about the next person. I am still paranoid that they are going to cheat and this and that. I over think it. I have to watch for signs as this has happened to me before and this sets you up for a fall. Even if there aren't any signs, you look for something and check people's phones and things which causes issues. I did check her phone."

[Mother, separated, same sex relationship]

"[My ex] was such an idiot and had such a different point of view from mine. How can you expect people to sit there for an hour when they don't know the people, the place, all the scenario?"

[Mother, separated, same sex relationship; referring to mediation]

33

Overview of findings for user need 1: As a parent I need to understand what parental conflict is

117. Parental conflict is viewed by professionals in this field as covering a broad spectrum of behaviours.

118. Whether cohabiting, separating, separated or divorced and in same- or opposite-sex relationships, parents talked about parental conflict in a similar way.

119. Our findings suggest that mothers closely aligned parental conflict (cohabiting or separated) with:

- controlling behaviours
- financial abuse
- arguing and verbal abuse
- infidelity (including online)
- issues around contact
- addictive behaviours
- different parenting styles
- low parental involvement or partner support

120. Our findings suggest that some men interviewed considered that parental conflict was related to:

- reduced finances / financial stress
- debt
- employment uncertainty / employment 'stress' (themselves or their partners)

121. Family support workers stated that, in their experience in general, mothers often engage more than fathers when seeking help with parental conflict.

122. Of the parents we interviewed, all were able to identify causes of the parental conflict in their relationship/s. Unsurprisingly, parents did not use terminology such as 'reducing parental conflict', 'parental conflict' or similar when describing relationship issues or concerns. Commonly, parents would use emotive and descriptive language when narrating instances and stories describing how parental conflict effected them individually and their families.

123. Emotive and overt descriptions of parental conflict between partners (whether living together or not) were often described as:

- loud arguing (in public or private)

- raising voices
- raging behaviours (e.g. 'storming' out, smashing objects, breaking down doors, screaming outside a partner's home)

124.   Behaviours not immediately associated with parental conflict by some of the parents we interviewed and could result in parents not addressing parental conflict sooner included:

- silences
- low level verbal abuse / using disrespectful language
- not raising voices / getting point across
- constant bickering / snapping
- resentment or anger presented through body language
- showing open annoyance but without shouting
- getting stressed and displaying stress
- on-going criticism of partner
- different views on parenting
- mood changes
- disagreements regarding cultural differences
- arguing using smartphones (texting and social media)

125.   Through the course of the interviews with parents, we observed that some belief systems and actions were normalised if an individual was routinely exposed to events and behaviours in everyday life. To many, parental conflict was to be expected in certain situations especially if an individual had experienced conflict in previous relationships or in their childhoods. Circumstances where parents anticipated parental conflict included:

- stressful situations created by internal or external pressures (e.g. debt, lack of employment, parenting children with behavioural issues, etc.)
- relationship breakdown and / or break ups (e.g. on-going communication issues, controlling behaviours, unstable on / off relationships)
- commitment to a partner and / or the children perceived as one-sided (e.g. infidelity, addictive behaviours, low parental involvement, casual relationships resulting in unplanned pregnancies)
- being 'young and naïve' and lacking experience with relationships
- cultural differences including LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender)
- religious differences
- legacy issues (debt on separation, trust of current partner impacted by previous experiences)
- separation or divorce (e.g. custody, living arrangements, contact, child maintenance, deciding on family finances, etc.)

- non-compliance with a family based arrangement, child maintenance and / or contact agreements

User need 2: Handling parental conflict

As a parent I need:

- to understand that the way I deal with conflict can drive further conflict
- to understand that our children are learning from me about how to deal with conflict
- to understand what addictive behaviours are and how my addictive behaviours can impact the long-term future of my children
- to understand that my mental health can impact my family as well as me

Parents told us:

126.   It's important to note that, although parents made the following comments throughout the interviews, they did not identify this as conflict.

"(The arguing) really affected my eldest. She was 13 in December. She went through a year and half where it was just constant upset all the time. She took everything out on me about absolutely everything. It was really horrendous…to the point where she would physically hit me."

[Mother, divorce, opposite sex couple]

"My eldest one nearly went off the rails with it. He was effected the most.   My youngest one acted like it was quite sad and he would sit in his room. My daughter backed me all the way. She was older. There are six years between all my kids."

[Mother, separated, currently co-habiting, same sex relationship]

"In the past I would go off, gamble, get drunk, go missing. I do use my phone for betting. I do moon bets…these mad accumulators, and buy lottery tickets."

[Father, divorced, currently co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

"We have had a lot of problems he's been on dating sites he's done drugs and gambling. He has changed from the person that I knew. He has changed now he seems to be in the depression stage, he just doesn't want to seem to get a job."

[Mother, co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

"I looked on his phone and I find out about his gambling and that he might be seeing someone else. I looked on his phone because he was acting strange. I

found it all out, with the gambling I checked the bank, with the girl he told me himself from using a dating site on his phone."

[Mother, co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

Overview of findings for user need 2: Handling parental conflict

127.   Many parents remained unaware of their coping behaviours for dealing with parental conflict. Through the interviews, our user researcher was able to identify coping strategies that parents used, although the parents themselves were unaware of them. Strategies included:

- not communicating
- constant bickering / moaning / being critical
- sending children out of the house or to their rooms
- leaving the house / deciding to live elsewhere
- taking a break and staying with friends / family
- raging / storming out of the house / arguing outside a partner's home

128.   Some parents reported leaving the family home during arguments as a means to 'calm things down' and to reduce the impact of the conflict on their children. However, this strategy would not always reduce conflict as some couples would continue to argue outside the family home.

129.   Other behaviours evidenced from interviews with parents as avoidance strategies or ways to combat stress, included gambling, online dating, addictive behaviours and living across two homes (one of which is the family home where the children live).

130.   As a coping strategy, some of the parents we interviewed became fixated on one issue as a possible solution to solving others. The fathers interviewed tended to focus on wanting better employment, more income and debt resolution. Mothers concentrated on family budgets (paying bills, paying rent) and their children's needs including looking online for professional help and diagnosis for children's challenging behaviours.

131.   All these strategies had the potential to continue to drive conflict where there was no resolution or addressing of the original disagreement and / or underlying issues generating the conflict.

132.   The discovery did not include interviews with children from families experiencing parental conflict. From descriptions provided by parents, there was some evidence to suggest that children were learning how to deal with conflict from their parents, however parents did not acknowledge this. Children's coping strategies, as reported by their parents, included:

- staying in or 'disappearing' to their bedrooms
- diminished communication and interactions with their parents
- leaving the house (often to go and stay with other relatives)
- intervening to stop arguments - both verbally and physically (frequently young teenagers)
- becoming aggressive or displaying challenging behaviours

133.   Many parents acknowledged the short-term impact on children during parental conflict situations such as being emotional, upset or showing avoidance behaviours (disappearing into bedrooms), but fewer accepted on-going medium and/or longer-term impact. For example, many parents did not recognise that behaviours displayed by children in the medium or long term could be the result of living with parental conflict, these included:

- presenting violent or intimidating behaviours (towards parents and sometimes siblings)
- showing concern and empathy for a distressed parent
- displaying signs of emotional distress - crying a lot, being 'clingy' (younger children)
- becoming argumentative (frequently young teenagers)
- exhibiting disruptive behaviours – criticising parents, silences, disappearing to bedrooms, confronting parents
- problems at school
- playing one parent off against the other
- unsettled sleep patterns and bedwetting (younger children)

134.   The behaviours above were described by parents during the interviews, but the parents did not correlate this behaviour with any parental conflict taking place in the family. This was true whether the parents were living together or separated.

135.   The parents we interviewed identified the following factors when considering the impact of parental conflict on their children:

- age of the child
- whether the children were present or e.g. in their bedroom, or at relatives, etc.
- level of parental conflict as perceived by the parent
- relationship status – whether they are together or separated

136. The age of the children experiencing parental conflict appeared to be an essential dynamic for many parents when considering if the parental conflict was impacting the children. Parents we interviewed told us:

- their parental conflict had little or no impact on babies and up to children aged seven, as they don't understand adult issues and behaviours especially if they were not in close proximity to the conflict situation
- children aged eight to twelve years old could be affected (often behavioural) by their parental conflict in the short to medium term, but parents reported this diminished or disappeared on receiving professional help and / or if the child was removed from the conflict situation
- children aged twelve years plus could be affected by their parental conflict but generally were seen as better able to deal with any medium and long-term impact of parental conflict as they were older and perceived as being more mature

137. Many parents reported that if their children were not in the room during the conflict, although the children could be in the family home, they believed the impact of the conflict was either nil or temporary regardless of age.

138. None of the parents interviewed perceived that exposure to consistent 'low level' parental conflict such as bickering and fault finding, had a lasting impact on their children's emotional or physical development.

139. Most parents interviewed assumed that medium to long term effects of parental conflict were mitigated if children were no longer exposed to the conflict, for example after separation, even if the parental conflict continued.

140. Several parents normalised children's behaviours and viewed some behaviours as unconnected to parental conflict, for example when:

- children's behaviours supported a parent's belief system e.g. 'teenagers are always difficult'; 'I was the same at that age'
- a child's behaviour improved after receiving professional help e.g. as a result of school mentoring
- behaviours were viewed as disciplinary issues related to perceived gender differences i.e. that boys are more challenging than girls when growing up

141. Several of those interviewed were parents of children with additional needs including:

- development and cognitive disorders (e.g. ADHD, autism, cognitive difficulties)
- mental health issues (e.g. depression)

- physical disabilities (e.g. spina bifida, dyspraxia)
- learning difficulties

142.   Mothers could be highly critical of their cohabiting partners or ex-partners for low parental involvement and / or lack of partner support when parenting a child with additional needs. Parenting stresses, particularly when parenting children with autism and ADHD, were quoted by some mothers as a causal factor in relationship breakdown.

143.   Parents interviewed reported differing strategies for coping with children's challenging behaviours, for example:

- not labelling a child as disruptive and asking others not to do so
- being tolerant (particularly for autistic children)
- seeking professional advice / help
- letting the child 'act out'
- acceptance / resignation (particularly teenagers and young adults)
- sending younger children to their rooms
- approaching ex-partners for support
- searching online for information (particularly for autism and ADHD)

144.   All the parents interviewed reported having experienced multiple couple relationships - commonly a mixture of short and long term. Some parents were conscious of their approach to relationships and reasons for relationship failure. However, the majority of the parents interviewed believed that:

- they were 'receivers' of their partner's poor behaviours
- they were rarely contributors or co-creators if a relationship failed
- certain behaviours in relationships were 'normal' e.g. bickering and silences

145.   Coping strategies for those in recurring relationship failure included:

- quick turn over of relationships in the hope the next one would be better
- consciously deciding not to allow a new partner to live in the family home to reduce complications if the relationship was unsuccessful
- deciding to stay single for a length of time and making their children's welfare a priority

146.   Addictive behaviours were reported by parents we interviewed to be drivers for conflict. Addictions such as gambling and drinking, and also online dating while in

40

a relationship, could lead directly to relationship breakdowns. Addictions were acknowledged by some as the underlying reason for their poor mental health, such as depression and anxiety, leading them to make poor life choices and decisions about partnerships.

147.   Addictive behaviours and activities described by parents included:

- online betting
- bulk lottery ticket purchasing
- serial online dating when in a relationship (associated with infidelity)
- alcoholism and heavy drinking
- drugs from cannabis to cocaine and heroin
- excessive online console gaming

148.   Certain on-going activities were not viewed as addictive behaviours by some parents, especially when these activities functioned as coping strategies for stress and avoidance. E.g. online betting, bulk lottery ticket buying and cannabis smoking.

149.   Parent's views on the impact of addiction on their relationships were mixed, examples included:

- a father betting online and purchasing lottery tickets did not comment about the possible impact on his stepchild or the family budget even though he was in serious debt. This parent talked about past alcoholism and hard drug use which directly lead to the break-up of a previous marriage. His ex-wife then prohibited contact with their young son
- excessive console gaming and cannabis smoking was closely associated by one mother with low parental involvement and continuing parental conflict and cited as major causes leading to her relationship breakup

150.   Children's needs could act as a prompt for parents to seek help for addiction and / or to leave an addicted partner. Examples included:
- leaving a co-dependent relationship with a cannabis smoking partner; the parent was tired of being bullied and intimidated for money to support the habit
- going to court to prevent an alcoholic father from having contact with his children and partner after separation

151.   Our findings suggest that digital was an enabler for some addictive behaviours, and drivers for parental conflict, and that smartphone apps facilitated online gambling and dating.

152. Several mothers stated that they had discovered a partner's online gambling and dating activities while checking their partner's smartphones. Checking a partner's smartphone was viewed as acceptable if a partner was exhibiting suspicious behaviours or suspected of being unfaithful. Any revelations discovered about a partner's online behaviour frequently fuelled arguments. Parents reported that these arguments would sometimes happen in front of their children.

153. Excessive online console gaming by one partner could be a source of parental conflict when linked to low parental involvement but was not viewed as addictive behaviour. One parent did monitor her son's online console gaming while other parents did not talk about this issue. The effects of exposure to high levels of violence in console games on children's behavioural development was raised as a concern by one family support worker.

User need 3: Conflict triggers and multiple issues

As a parent I need:

- to understand that conflict in relationships may not have a single cause and / or a single solution
- to understand how my behaviours can add to parental conflict
- to understand how parental conflict has wider implications for my children and also my partner and other family relationships

Parents told us:

"I'm waiting for medication for my youngest. We've been waiting twelve months. We've been through the diagnosis process. The doctor referred him. I've got two older ones and I could tell he was always different. He could cause problems in the relationship before my partner became ill. He can cause arguments when he wants to."

[Mother, co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

"You wouldn't believe how much money stress there is. I won't even go on the electoral register because of a potential storm. It only takes a birthday or something really tiny and that's it. I don't even talk to my creditors, because they don't talk real world numbers."

[Father, co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

"There are differences of opinion – I know she's looking for work but, for me, it's you know, you need to try harder…but I don't want to get so resentful that the relationship breaks down. So it is stressful and you know Christmas is coming, so it gets more stressful because of the money"

[Mother, separated, currently co-habiting in same sex relationship]

"We argue over the kids mainly. My youngest gets really squeaky and it winds me up and then I get stressed and my partner gets stressed. Or with money, one says something. I can't see what she sees, and she doesn't see what I see. It normally calms down a bit when the kids go to bed"

[Father, cohabitating, opposite sex relationship]

"Her family chip in quite a bit – anything we need really. Her mum and dad will help out"

[Father, co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

"If (my partner) and I disagree the kids are usually in bed. We don't argue in front of them."

[Father, co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

"I don't think it affected my son. Funnily enough, we never really rowed a lot in front of him. I don't think he really remembers us living together. He has heard me shouting on the phone at his Dad."

[Mother, separated, opposite sex relationship]

A family support worker told us:

"Parents could be dealing with a number of issues… parental conflict, behavioural issues, parenting, housing and mental health. Many can identify the problems – the issue is they don't know how to address them"

[Family support worker]

Overview of findings for User need 3: Conflict triggers and multiple issues

154.   Parents we interviewed from low-income households were often coping with multiple on-going issues in their lives around health (including mental health), children's needs, employment and income. As a result, many parents found it

difficult to unpick their lives without professional input (such as from family support workers, schools and health professionals).

155.   Consequently, many parents interviewed did not understand the full repercussions of living with parental conflict either for themselves or their children (whether in a relationship or separated). In addition, improving the quality of their relationship when co-habiting, such as finding time as a couple, was not a high priority against other competing concerns.

156.   Nine out of 18 parents stated they were experiencing mental health issues. Family support workers commented that this was one of the bigger issues they had to deal with when working with families. None of the parents interviewed talked about impact of their mental health issues on their children. Although some mothers were critical of their partners if they felt their partners were unsupportive with regard to their mental health needs.

157.   Mothers looking after children with additional needs and challenging behaviours, including autism and ADHD, frequently suffered from poor mental health and often sought treatment for sleep deprivation and depression.

158.   Many parents interviewed reported how financial fears as a result of changing incomes raised levels of parental conflict. Parental conflict involving financial matters could take place in front of children and included:
- one parent being critical of the budgeting activities of the other
- stressing about not being able to provide basics for children e.g. school uniforms, school clubs, credit on smartphones, new shoes, etc.
- verbalised concerns that their children were missing out compared to others e.g. holidays, new smartphones, designer clothes, etc.
- expressing distress when describing instances where they had to deny children the things they wanted, which could lead to arguments with their partners

159.   On separation, some parents advised they were left with couple debt which created conflict when communicating with the ex-partner.

160.   Any unforeseen financial event was a tipping point in many households, such as a higher than normal energy bill, and a stress point for parental conflict. Parents with limited funds could defer paying household bills to provide basics for their children, for example, school uniforms, and in extreme cases of debt, food.

161.   Family events, such as weddings, were seen as increasing financial pressure; for this reason, family events requiring funds were sometimes unattended. For Christmas and children's birthdays, some parents would budget months in advance. However, as surplus funds were not always available, some parents would again forgo paying essential bills to provide presents for their children.

162.   Day-to-day coping strategies in dealing with debt and budgeting included:
- placing one parent in charge of budgeting (typically when co-habiting)
- splitting financial responsibilities (mothers and fathers paying different bills, expenses)
- not using credit cards, using a debit only bank account
- declaring bankruptcy (often on separation)
- dealing with creditors through professional assistance e.g. Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)
- depending on other family members to provide additional financial support
- asking an ex-partner to pay additional costs not covered by an informal or formal arrangement e.g. school uniform, shoes, credit on child's phone, etc.
- being honest with older children about constrains on the family budget

163.   Some parents expressed that financial anxiety prevented them from seeking debt / financial advice.

164.   No evidence was gathered during the interviews that parents were going online for debt information or advice. A few separated parents had previously visited online sites to understand more about seeking financial support after a relationship breakup.

165.   One mother facing eviction over non-payment of council tax stated she had attempted to fill in an online rent rebate form. However, she was not confident about her digital skills and was dependent on her smartphone's 4G connection, as her home had no internet. The online form was comprehensive and she abandoned the attempt. She felt it would be more appropriate to talk to someone in the council about her situation.

166.   During the online search task, a father searched for debt support using the keywords 'debt free' for a Google search. He was overwhelmed by results listing insolvency companies and did not want to continue. He stated he preferred to speak to a trusted organisation such as the Citizens Advice Bureau. Other parents voiced similar responses: wanting to deal with debt and budgeting issues offline and face to face with trusted providers.

167.   A few parents were using banking apps on their smartphones to access debit accounts to assist with budgeting – app support and set up had been provided in their bank's branch or with assistance from a trusted helper.

User need 4: Parenting when separated

As a parent I need:

- to understand my on-going obligations when agreeing to a family based arrangement
- to understand my on-going obligations around the contact arrangements I have agreed for my children

Parents told us:

"My ex did support me a little bit but I would never go to him for support. I have asked for my ex-partner to take our son so I can have a break. I say I am going to get exhausted and then you are going to have to get more involved but he won't take him overnight. So I rely on other people, family."

[Mother, separated, opposite sex relationship]

"My ex told me to come down on Friday to get my money, and then said no you've not been respectful. The final straw was when he rolled the money into balls and flicked them at me in the street in front of his friends."

[Mother, separated, opposite sex relationships]

"I went to CAB in the first place (to find out about divorce) and spoke to someone who directed me to lawyers and things, which I got support with. I didn't go online or anything, I wasn't savvy enough! I probably would've picked a lawyer that charged thousands!"

[Father, divorced, co-habiting, opposite sex relationship]

"I didn't approach [my ex-partner] for money because he was too much of a live wire and I didn't know what he was capable of. With my first relationship I tried, and it worked, but I didn't want to put myself through it with the second one."

[Mother, separated, opposite sex relationships]

"You just have to like get on with the situation. There's lot of things I've had to sacrifice – friends, weddings, family stuff, it's just too expensive. Seems like with dads, they expect mums to do everything and move everything. Lots of things – nights out, family weddings, it's always mums who miss out."

[Mother, divorced, opposite sex relationship]

"[We] just decided between us. I'm not 100%. I went to a solicitor last week. He is harassing me a bit on text messages and things, so I think I might need something in writing."

[Mother, divorced, opposite sex relationship; referring to family based arrangement]

"Sometimes my ex-partner and his new partner say they'll take my son to school on a Monday, but I know his dad starts work early so she'll be the one taking him

to work. I can't accept that. I asked the solicitor who said I should accept her as part of the family, but I can't yet. But she is nice to him and he likes her."

[Mother, divorced, opposite sex relationship]

"The kids have seemed a bit more normal recently but no one has said anything and I'm not opening up that can of worms."

[Mother, separated, same sex relationship; referring to talking to her children about

the separation]

"I used to have really toxic arguments with my ex, when he wouldn't turn up for his daughter. I would go to his house and scream and shout. I've done terrible things like kicked his door down."

[Mother, recently separated, opposite sex relationship]

A Family support worker told us:

"They might say 'things are difficult between me and his dad', or 'we can't agree about so and so' or 'they are threatening me with social services or court'. Often they'll refer to phone conversations or texts. They will show you a whole thread of conversation - not just face to face".

[Family support worker]

Overview of findings for User need 4: Parenting when separated

168.   Whether co-habiting or co-parenting when separated, disagreements about parenting did lead to regular sessions of bickering and fault-finding. Parenting disagreements were often about disciplinary approaches, bedtime routines, form of play with other siblings and school issues.

169.   Blended families, resulting from two families merging when individuals form new relationships, could have advantages for children. For example, some step-parents were proactive in the parenting of their step children such as helping with schooling. Blended families could also provide new support networks for parents and their children.

170.   Parents did not always associate the development or continuance of children's challenging behaviours with the introduction of a new partner into the family. Limited evidence from this research suggests that some children experienced

difficulties navigating changing family dynamics resulting from blended family formation.

171. Parents could also be impacted by the separation and the restructuring of families through blending – potentially a driver for parental conflict. For example, step-fathers could face criticism from mothers for disciplining or parenting non-biological children especially when parenting styles differed.

172. Some parents did understand that different parenting styles were the underlying reason for their disagreements – such as one being softer than the other – often equated with their own childhood experiences around parenting. None of those interviewed appeared to want to compromise their views on parenting – so these conflict issues remained unresolved.

173. Those with positive post separation relationships often reported high levels of parenting support from ex-partners particularly around school issues, education, contact and financial support.

174. In contrast, some mothers stated they would not approach ex-partners for parenting support as the relationship breakdown had been the result of controlling behaviours and / or physical and emotional abuse.

175. Additional examples given where a parent could be selective in seeking parenting support after separation included:

- if an ex-partner continued to present controlling behaviours towards the parent and / or children during contact
- a parent was concerned that an ex-partner's parenting style was deficient (such as allowing underage drinking)
- a parent wanted to be independent or ensure consistency in parenting styles
- a parent was concerned that an ex-partner's response would be disproportionate

176. Some parents we interviewed stated they had attended mediation when separating and when seeking to agree maintenance and / or contact arrangements. Some parents told us they did go online for information and support on separation, for example:

- they went online to find information about agreeing contact between their children and ex-partner
- they approached professional organisations (e.g. CAB or a solicitor) - particularly when individuals were unsure of the process
- they depended on trusted helpers such as family, friends and new partners to locate information both online and offline

177.   Some mothers and fathers reported they had been online to locate information on mediation, contact, child maintenance and custody. Most stated they preferred talking to someone and / or to have paper copies when it came to complex 'legal' issues. None of the parents cited looking for this information via smartphones – use of work computers and seeking help from a trusted helper (family, friends, CAB and legal professionals) were mentioned.

178.   Older children did arrange contact with fathers (usually via their smartphones) on behalf of younger siblings on requests from mothers, so that the mothers wouldn't have to confront or meet their ex-partner.

179.   None of the mothers and fathers interviewed had been online to find information about communicating with children on relationship issues. Professional help for children's counselling was often provided at a school's urging and / or via referrals through health professionals.

180.   Parents' experiences of the mediation process were varied:

- one father felt the process was orientated towards mothers. He did not continue with mediation after attending the first meeting
- some parents found the process helpful in formalising financial and contact arrangements particularly where couples had stalled in their communications to reach an amicable agreement
- other parents were stressed by the process, especially if a parent felt that their ex-partner was not engaging constructively, which could prompt these parents to take legal steps to finalise arrangements
- many parents expressed concerns about the cost of mediation especially when in low-income households
- mothers reported feeling disempowered by mediation if their ex-partner was deliberately uncooperative and unreasonable during discussions, or did not adhere to agreements made, or created barriers when collecting agreed financial support and maintaining contact agreements

181.   On separation, most parents acknowledged that parental conflict around financial support and contact issues could negatively impact children regardless of age. Mothers described a range of emotional and physical behaviours presented by young children (up to 7 years of age) when ex-partners avoided or were inconsistent with contact visits e.g. crying, getting upset easily, separation anxiety, bedwetting, etc.

182.   Some parents reported that ex-partners were very supportive, adhered to agreements and made significant efforts to keep in contact with their children (including step children).

183.   Conversely, the majority of the separated parents had experienced significant levels of parental conflict with their ex-partners (this included a separated father caring for his daughter), for example, when ex-partners:

- added conditions to the collection of financial support when this was not part of the original arrangement
- created situations where parents had to chase ex-partners for small amounts of money
- agreed to pay certain costs but then failed to do so
- withheld financial support when a parent starts a new relationship
- failed to adhere to contact arrangements
- were overly rigid about contact arrangements once agreed
- regularly changed contact timetables at short notice
- demanded to see children when children didn't want to be in contact
- didn't provide parent support around children's needs and / or challenging behaviours
- contradicted and / or undermined the parent's disciplinary efforts during contact
- demonstrated low parental involvement and parenting of children during contact visits

184.   Parents described situations where ex-partners continued to exhibit intimidating and controlling behaviours when providing financial support and during contact visits. These situations resulted in continued stress and frustration for both the carer parent and their children.

185.   Some separated mothers expressed resentment when ex-partners appeared to be experiencing fulfilling lifestyles post separation such as new cars and going on regular holidays. These parents felt that their ex-partners did not understand the financial sacrifices that mothers had to make for the sake of their children such as not going to family events, missing holidays and reduced socialisation.

186.   Some mothers reported feeling that ex-partners could manipulate the child maintenance system by not being truthful about their incomes and this could result in mothers receiving less financial support for the children.

187.   Reported coping strategies by parents when experiencing parental conflict with an ex-partner over contact and / or financial support included:

- accepting an ex-partner's poor behaviours (as they felt disempowered)
- negotiating and or agreeing to new conditions
- using older children as go-betweens in negotiations with their ex-partner

- not seeking financial support if it was going to be difficult
- asking for donations from other family members

188.   Parents were frequently concerned about contact quality, that is, the level of parenting their children received while on contact visits with ex-partners. Some mothers and one father were concerned that other adults they didn't know or had any contact with, usually new partners of their ex-partners, were parenting their children during contact visits. For some parents, this created significant amounts of stress and uncertainty about their children's welfare.

189.   Where relations were positive, parents felt empowered to set conditions about parenting e.g. instructing an ex-partner about a son's excessive gaming. Where relations were strained, parents were less able to enforce conditions during contact visits.

190.   In some cases, parents were even concerned for their child's safety during contact visits but felt constrained to take action if an ex-partner had equal parenting rights. Examples given by parents included:

- allowing an under aged teenager to drink regularly during contact visits
- a father permitting his daughter under 16 to be sexually active when on holiday with him and his new partner
- a single father becoming concerned when his young daughter, after a contact visit, told him she had seen her mother's new partner hitting her mother

191.   In general, parents did not appear to communicate extensively with their children about the circumstances surrounding their relationship issues and / or separation. Parents were frequently more concerned with moving on in their lives than being retrospective about their past relationships.

192.   Several parents felt it would be inappropriate to talk to their children until they were older and could understand the complexities around relationships and separation.

193.   Some parents believed that their children were too young to fully understand adult experiences and created child versions when explaining relationship matters - such as 'We both love you but mummy and daddy don't get on'; 'Mum and dad decided to live in separate houses', etc.

194.   Many parents seem to deliberately avoid talking to their older children (8 to 12 years old) post separation until their children approached them and / or challenging behaviours occurred. Most parents then responded by seeking out professional help (e.g. school counselling, CAMHS, etc.). Other parents were

concerned that talking about separation would upset the children or resurface challenging behaviours.

Overall summary: The user research highlights digital opportunities to engage with low-income parents

195.   The LGA findings, supported by what parents and family support workers told us, shows us that there are opportunities in the digital landscape that present significant advantages for the programme to deliver self-service online support earlier in the conflict experience so that parents can resolve issues sooner:

- knowing where a target audience goes online (i.e. social media) is a major advantage as if content is placed in these online spaces, then discovery, visibility and access to the programme's digital initiative is possible during a parent's habitual online activities
- social media networks host content that is easily shared and commented on, with the potential for a digital offering to go viral and so reach wider audiences
- the target audience is already skilled in the ways of social media so the potential barriers to engagement are vastly reduced
- well-established digital methodologies, (such as Agile which incorporates user-centric approaches), support the development of online offerings by utilising user needs and advocating on-going iteration

196.   Internet tools are available to support test and learn approaches for a digital initiative when live, such as Google analytics and social listening tools. Google analytics provide statistics and information about user behaviours - useful for SEO purposes. Social listening tools can provide user feedback on sentiment and impact as well analytic data for SEO.

197.   The LGA helped us to frame our thinking about how society, particularly our target group of low-income/workless families were using online tools to look for support to reduce conflict in their parental relationships. Our interviews and questionnaires have identified clear user needs that, in the next chapter, we have made recommendations to address.

Recommendations

198.   As a result of this discovery, we have developed a series of recommendations which we think should be considered and tested when developing new digital support to help engage and re-engage parents digitally to reduce parental conflict.

199.   These recommendations have been split into two sections:
- helping low income parents to access online support and
- the user needs to be addressed specifically around reducing parental conflict.

200.   We will start to test these recommendations through the Reducing Parental Conflict Challenge Fund and we encourage other organisations to also build on these findings.

Helping parents to access online support

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) strategies	We need to test the best approach to capturing parents' online attention. Any SEO Strategy should ensure that reducing parental conflict (RPC) material / support is consistently in the top 5 of popular search engine results (Google was favoured by all of the users we interviewed). SEO should include social media.
Readability	Online content should reflect the Government Digital Service guidance which designs material for a reading age of 9 years. This will promote accessibility for our target audience by avoiding 'heavy text' based content.
Accessibility	GDS standard minimum (AA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) as a minimum).
Devices	RPC material / support should be accessible on a smartphone as well as all other devices.
Place RPC material where our target group go online. Do not expect users to go searching	Social media – particularly Facebook and YouTube and signposting to forums via Google searches (if relevant). Material in online places linked to child-related issues (because this is what parents search for first).
Be flexible (Agile) in approach. Target audience include those	If the material is not maintaining engagement, the material and any corresponding online user journey

with low literacy and digital skills	should be developed further to increase user engagement.
	Deliver evidence of flexible (Agile) approaches to meet changing user needs from project start to end:
	• meet user needs according to GDS principles and so demonstrate on-going impact / success
	• be flexible to target our audience's online searching strategies (e.g. analytics, on-going user need feedback)
Role models and trusted online 'brands'	Review the importance of role models and consider building a recognised brand (e.g. following on Instagram / Facebook) and recognised / trusted images (e.g. children's charity websites use faces of children) as a means to engage, attract and retain the target audience for RPC material.
Peer support / expert advice on the go and 'gamification' principles	Consider promoting online user engagement / interactions with RPC material as the target audience frequently demonstrated high interest in peer group support / advice (if moderated) and expert advice (professionals).
	Social media with interactive on the go / 'gamification' element, for example rewarding positive behaviours for engaging using 'tick' symbols, similar to online shopping experiences. Gamification here is not about creating online gaming rewards.

201. Through interviews with parents from low-income households we have also identified a set of user needs which we would like to try to address. Addressing these needs could help to overcome some of the issues that parents from low-income families are dealing with when experiencing parental conflict. We will be working with partners through the Reducing Parental Conflict Challenge Fund to develop and test these user needs further.

202. We recommend that other organisations continue to develop the user needs we have identified and share their learning of what works.

203. There are gaps identified in our research and for further user research could be undertaken with men, additional ethnic groups and possibly LGBT parents to see whether they have specific experiences or circumstances that may suggest other user needs.

Addressing parental conflict: parents' needs

Issue	Parent need identified
Understanding what parental conflict is	As a parent, I need: • to understand when we are in conflict as a couple • to understand that my partner may think about parental conflict in a different way to me • to understand that parental conflict may cover a wider range of behaviours than I think it does • parental conflict 'material' presented in a way that makes sense to me • parental conflict 'material' to be in places where I go online for other things that matter to me • to understand that what I learned in my past doesn't have to influence my present
Handling parental conflict	As a parent, I need: • to understand that the way I deal with conflict can drive further conflict • to understand that our children are learning from me about to how to deal with conflict • to understand what addictive behaviours are and how my addictive behaviours can impact the long-term future of my children • to understand that my mental health can impact my family as well as me
Conflict triggers and multiple issues	As a parent, I need: • to understand that conflict in relationships may not have a single cause and / or a single solution • to understand how my behaviours can add to parental conflict • to understand how parental conflict has wider implications for my children, my partner and other family relationships
Parenting when separated	As a parent, I need: • to understand my on-going obligations when agreeing to a family based arrangement

	• to understand my on-going obligations around the contact arrangements I have agreed for my children

Conclusion

204.   This research highlights a clear opportunity to learn how to help parents from low-income families to reduce the conflict in their parental relationships through digital delivery routes. This could enable parents to address issues which impact their children earlier than they might have done and before the situation requires more resource intensive support.

205.   We interviewed parents from low-income households experiencing parental conflict and we know from this research that they do go online and where they seek information and support. They focus on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, and they use forums when these appear high on the list in their Google searches.

206.   Through this user research, we have identified four key user needs in relation to resolving parental conflict and eight key approaches to developing online digital support which we will test to understand more about what engages and re-engages parents in low-income households, and if that digital support helps influence the parents' next steps.

207.   Facilitating digital support is a key element of the Reducing Parental Conflict programme. We believe the findings will also be of relevance to other government departments, local authorities, private organisations and the voluntary sector, to shape and improve digital services for parents in low-income households.

208.   We would recommend building on the research in this report using an Agile approach to refine and develop further the user needs we have highlighted.

209.   Ensuring online support meets the needs of parents is critical if we are to engage and re-engage them digitally and help them to reduce their parental conflict earlier.

Next Steps

210.   The RPC programme is grant funding digital innovation through a Challenge Fund to enable more families who are experiencing parental conflict to identify and address parental conflict sooner and before the conflict becomes entrenched. The Challenge Fund Delivery Partner will ensure that the grant funding is used to generate as much quality evidence as possible, informed by the findings from this report, to help learn what digital initiatives work. This will help inform future policy development.

211.   The Challenge Fund Delivery Partner will produce a written Final Challenge Fund Learning Report on the evidence produced by the digital initiatives.

212.   We hope that this report will also prompt others to use this initial research, to test and learn, through iterative design what works online to engage parents from low-income families. We are particularly keen to learn, not only what works to engage people online but specifically what works in the digital space to support parents to reduce conflict in their relationship, ultimately to improve the lives and prospects of children.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Session protocols

213.   Protocols for good research practice were adhered to:

- on recruitment, parents were informed about the topic of the research and session requirements
- signed consent was obtained pre-interview
- the consent form included a leaflet outlining current Data Protection laws
- individuals set the pace of the session
- post interview, a parent was provided with a list of support agencies / charities
- if a parent felt that the interview had raised personal issues, it was recommended that they seek professional support

Appendix 2 - Discussion guide sample

214. The following guidelines are a framework to describe the process when interacting with participants.

215. A flexible format allows the facilitator to have a natural conversation with participants, which is essential for gathering honest and accurate qualitative data, and facilitates the exploration of interesting comments from participants in more detail.

	Questions
Warm up, demographic information	*3 – 5 minutes* **(Review profile data provide about participant to open discussion e.g. you have two children, tell me about them, you have a partner, how long have you lived together, etc.?)** • Prompt, about relationship, family set up, employed, status of relationship, etc.

Triggers and conflict	*10 to 15 minutes*
	
	Note: use the same language as the participant when referring to parental conflict
	
	• Do you disagree about things as a couple?
	  • How often would you say you disagree?
	• When you disagree, what form does this take?
	  • Prompt, arguing, silence, shouting, lots of emotion
	• What do you disagree about?
	  • Prompt, what do you think what you disagree about is the real issue?

	Questions
	• What do you think your partner feels about your disagreements? • Do you think your partner has the same understanding about the things you are disagreeing about as you? • Prompt, explore
Self-definition	*5 minutes* • If you were describing your current relationship issues to someone outside of your parent, family or friends, how would you describe it? • [Note: this description, and how it correlates with any online searching queries/behaviours]

Impact on others	*10 minutes*
	
	• What impact do you think your disagreements have on others in your family?
	    • Prompt, children, other family members?
	        ▪ Prompt, none, ask why?
	        ▪ Some or higher impact, [Explore]

Appendix 3 - Recruitment screen example

Demographic data

1. What is your age?

18-24 years old	Continue – aim for x 4
25-34 years old	
35-44 years old	Continue aim for mix
45-54 years old	
55-64 years old	
65 years plus	
Prefer not to say	

2. What is your employment status?

Employed full time (40 or more hours per week)	Continue
Employed part time (up to 39 hours per week)	Continue
Self employed	Continue
Homemaker and/or full time parent caregiver	Continue
Unemployed	
Unable to work	
Retired	CLOSE
Student	CLOSE
Prefer not to say	CLOSE

3. What is your annual household income?

Less than £20,000	Continue
£21,000 to £25,000	CLOSE
Over £26,000	CLOSE
Prefer not to say	CLOSE

4. What is your level of education?

Degree or equivalent	Continue NO QUOTA
Higher Education	
A level or equivalent	
GCSEs grades A*-C or equivalent	
Other qualifications	
No qualification	
Don't know	

5. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

Aim for diversity in recruitment

| Please note response: ………………………………………………………………… |
| Prefer not to say |

6. How would you describe your religion?

| Please note response: ………………………………………………………………… |
| None – **SKIP Question 10 below** |
| Prefer not to say |

7. Do you consider that you are actively practising your religion?

| Yes | Continue - aim for a mix |
| No | |

Prefer not to say	

8. Do you have a disability or accessibility requirements?

Quota: 1 – 2 participants. Note: Description of disability. If participant uses assistive technologies (e.g. screen reader) or has specific accessibility requirements please use the contact on this brief to discuss

Please note response: …………………………………………………………………….
Prefer not to say

9. How would you describe your current or past relationship?

Note: When referring to relationship, could include husband/wife/spouse/partner

Same sex couple	Continue
Opposite sex couple (does not have to be registered partnership)	Aim X 2
Lone parent family	Continue
Other	Continue at discretion

10. What is the status of your current / past relationship?

Married	Continue – aim for a mix of types
Cohabiting	
Separating	
Divorced or Separated	
Other (please note)	Continue at discretion

11. Are you experiencing or have you experienced problems as a couple relating to any of the following issues?

[Choose all that apply]

	Yes/No	
Being in debt		

Child maintenance arrangements		Continue – aim for a mix
Managing finances in the home		
Couple intimacy including sex		
Health and / or Disability		
Parenting		
Couple Communication		
Separation		
Other (please specify)		Continue at discretion

12. Are you a parent or have regular responsibility for children aged 16 or under?

Yes	Continue
No	CLOSE

Digital

13. What device do you use to connect to the internet? [Choose all that apply]

Device	Type
Mobile phone (note type e.g. IPhone)	
Tablet (note type e.g. Apple, Google)	
Desktop (e.g. Windows, Mac)	
Gaming Console (e.g. Xbox)	
I don't use a device to connect to the internet	
I don't know	
Other (please specify)	

14. On a scale where 1 is **not at all** comfortable and 5 is **very** comfortable, how comfortable are you:

	1 - not	2	3	4	5 – very
Creating an email account					
Sending emails					
Deleting spam emails					
Using a search engine					
Watching a YouTube or video online					
Leaving a comment on an online discussion website (forum)					
Downloading and using a mobile app					
Evaluate whether a website is safe					
Connecting a device to a Wi-Fi					
Finding your way around a website					
Continue – aim for a mix of scores and at least **three / four participants** with **majority** of scores of 3, 2 and 1					

15. On a scale from very confident to not very confident, how confident do you feel doing the following activities in English?

	Very confident	Confident	Neither	Not confident	Not very confident
Reading					
Understand					
Writing					
Speaking					
Prefer not to say					

NOTES FOR RECRUITER:

- Do you feel that the respondent was articulate and able to speak English clearly? If not, please decline.
- On recruitment, capture the respondent's full name, address, preferred contact details and a preferred time slot for the interview session.

Appendix 4 – Methodology – methods and techniques

Analysis Framework

1. Various methods and techniques were utilised to produce a series of outputs that condensed the research data into a digestible format for use across the RPC programme.

2. The analysis framework included:

   - thematic coding of interviews (parents and family support workers)
   - process tracing data and affinity grouping (using the multiple data sets to correlate evidence)
   - questionnaire analysis
   - review of desk research (Landscape Gap Analysis, readability and accessibility reports)
   - development and evaluation of completed assumptions grid

Thematic coding

3. The qualitative data gathered from this discovery research was analysed using thematic coding techniques so that sub-themes and key themes could be surfaced from the interview data. This approach is a highly inductive and well-recognised methodology when analysing large amounts of qualitative data. (An inductive approach is concerned with the generation of new theories emerging from the data).

4. Thematic analysis, derived from Ground Theory[11], emphasises pinpointing, examining and recording patterns or themes from research data. The qualitative data from the interviews were not corrected for spelling or grammar when analysed, and coded in a 'raw' state to preserve the integrity of the data.

5. Through a process of coding through five phases, meaningful patterns are surfaced. These phases are: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among the codes, reviewing themes, refining and naming themes.

6. The thematic codes were formulated:

   - to highlight situations, behaviours and beliefs aligned with programme objectives
   - to cover both positive and negative aspects where appropriate e.g. parental support could be present or absent

---

[11] Strauss, A., & Juliet, C. (1994). Grounded Theory Methodology: An Overview. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln Handbook of Qualitative Research. 1st ed. (pp. 273-284).

- demonstrated differentiation - distinguishing and / or making connections between the surfaced themes across the interview groups i.e. parents and practitioners
- to cross-theme the parents and family support worker interviews, with a few exceptions
- to demonstrate strong links / associations with other codes

7. Approximately 1,800 units of data from the interviews with parents and family support workers were coded producing over 90 themed codes. These were further categorised into higher-level codes to facilitate in-depth insight extraction.

8. Higher levels codes covered areas such as:

- behaviours e.g. addiction, controlling behaviours
- belief systems
- conditions and environment e.g. debt, contact and child maintenance
- confrontation / dispute patterns
- coping strategies
- children's behaviours / impact
- technology, digital skills and online behaviours

Process tracing and affinity grouping

9. Process tracing, using data from the analysis framework, was conducted to:
   - extract insights across the data sets
   - correlate insights across the data sets
   - prove or disprove the primary assumptions

10. Process tracing was undertaken using manual affinity grouping. Affinity grouping is a practical means to visualise and organise data. Ideas and data points are sorted into groups to highlight natural relationships for further analysis.

Appendix 5 – Assumptions grid

No.	ASSUMPTION	CONFIRMED OR NOT CONFIRMED	COMMENTS
A1	Able to identify triggers that created parental conflict	**Confirmed**	Able to recognise triggers commonly expressed in emotive terms
A2	Will seek online / offline for advice on relationship conflict	**Not confirmed**	Majority of online and offline information seeking focused on children's needs not reducing parental conflict
A3	Able to use search engines to look for RPC content	**Not confirmed**	Majority had never looked for RPC content online but had mainly offline (professionals e.g. doctors, social workers via Family Centres, counsellors, etc.)
A4	Able to refine their search (keywords) if they decide the information was not applicable	**Not confirmed**	Most users struggled to refine searches, search strategies were often unfocused unless prompted
A5	Able to identify different types of information / advice online	**Not confirmed**	Target audience had a less broad internet use and limited online experience, than assumed

A6	Will want to look at various sources / channels	**Not confirmed**	Target audience had a less broad internet use than assumed and favour social media and often visited sites (e.g. NHS)
A7	Are able to recognise different forms of online content e.g. website versus forums	**Confirmed**	Majority were able to differentiate
A8	Will want to engage with online sources featuring a recognised brand and / or role model	**Confirmed**	Majority followed celebrities on social media (including celeb mums), 'brands' include trusted sites such as NHS and Children's Charities
A9	Will want to save online content for later use	**Not confirmed**	Majority stated they did not habitually save online content. Their strategy was to try and use the same search terms to re-locate content

			73	
A10	Parents will understand the negative effects on their children when their relationship is in conflict	**Confirmed**	**Not confirmed**	**Not a 'black and white' situation**– majority acknowledged short term effect if the child was present (sending to their room was a common strategy). Age of child considered important e.g. if a very young child, parents thought it would have no / less impact, they thought older children (teenagers) could cope with impact better. Long term effects were rarely acknowledged; the majority thought impact reduced or was nil if parental conflict occasional (e.g. over) or parent absent contact
A11	Confident can use information / advice they find online	**Confirmed**	**Not confirmed**	Yes, if related to children (autism, other behaviours). Did not see evidence of parents able to search for support to reduce conflict

Appendix 6 – Landscape Gap Analysis resources list

A list of some of the resources that were documented as having being reviewed as part of the LGA:

- Back linko - https://backlinko.com/youtube-ranking-factors
- Good things Foundation - https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/sites/default/files/research-publications/ofcom_report_v4_links.pdf
- Good Things Foundation & Professor Simeon Yates… supported by BT – The real digital divide- June 2017
- Google – www.google.co.uk
- Kodagoda, Neesha and Wong, B. L. William and Khan, Nawaz (2009) Identifying information seeking behaviours of low and high literacy users: combined cognitive task analysis. In: Proceedings of NDM9, the 9th international conference on naturalistic decision making. The British Computer Society., pp. 347-354.
- Literacy Trust - https://literacytrust.org.uk/information/what-is-literacy
- Lloyds Bank - https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index/key-findings.asp#digitalskills
- Market Research Society
- Medium - https://medium.com/web-design-web-developer-magazine/internet-forums-are-generally-speaking-long-dead-dont-do-them-85031404fd6d
- National Readership Survey (NRS)
- Ofcom - https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/adults-media-use-and-attitudes
- Research gate - https://www.researchgate.net/publication/215500461_The_Google_generation_The_information_behaviour_of_the_researcher_of_the_future
- Rice media - https://www.ricemedia.co.uk/blog/why-forums-arent-dead/
- Search engine journal - https://www.searchenginejournal.com/mobile-optimization-best-practices-mobile-first/250449/
- Smart insights - https://www.smartinsights.com/mobile-marketing/mobile-marketing-strategy/3-easy-steps-optimise-website-mobile-first-index-2018/
- The Tech Partnership - https://www.thetechpartnership.com/basic-digital-skills/basic-digital-skills-framework/
- We are flint - https://www.slideshare.net/weareflint/uk-us-social-media-demographics-2018-88015084
- Web fx - https://www.webfx.com/tools/read-able/).
- Wordstream - https://www.wordstream.com/long-tail-keywords
- Youtube – www.youtube.co.uk