

Use of online advice and support by single parents in Scotland

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**How do single parents make use of online advice and support?
What do single parents think about online advice and support?
Are some single parents more likely to use online services?**

Why this matters

Widening use of the internet is one of the National Indicators that is used to assess how Scotland is performing as part of the National Performance Framework. More than four out of every five adults in Scotland report that they are now using the internet for personal use. It is widely accepted that many benefits can accrue from access, such as cheaper online shopping and increased awareness of employment opportunities. It may also be a way to tackle social isolation and loneliness by providing opportunities for social interaction, or by providing users with guidance on how to tackle these issues.

What do we already know?

Accessing the internet is now considered to be a common occurrence in the UK with only 12% of the population considering themselves to be non-users according to Ofcom's [Adults Media Use and Attitudes Report \(2018\)](#). The report also highlighted that people in lower socio-economic groups are less likely to go online through choice and lack of access. Furthermore, a recent review of the literature on access and use of information and communications technology (ICT) by [Zamani \(2017\)](#) established that single parents face barriers in accessing online support as a result of living in poverty, given that they are unable to afford a mode of access or data connection. Nevertheless, the review also indicated that online advice and support offer an opportunity to combat loneliness by widening communication opportunities. In considering the use of online services and support to decrease loneliness, the literature tends to focus on older populations. For example, [Choi et al's \(2012\)](#) found that there was a tendency for internet interventions to decrease loneliness among ageing populations. Given the commonalities that single parents share with the older population in relation to loneliness, the research suggests that there may be value for single parents in learning from the experiences of work with older people. One single parent specific study conducted in Canada by [Lipman et al. \(2011\)](#) focused on issues such as child development, social isolation, financial stress and coping mechanisms for single mothers. The intervention developed into group-based web support, which was found to decrease social isolation among single mothers.

Our research

This is the fourth of seven research briefings arising from the Single Parent Community Connections project. With the support of the European Union and the Scottish Government, this [Social Innovation Fund](#) project has two aims. First, it aims to better understand isolation and loneliness among single parents in Scotland. Second, it aims to use this knowledge to design and deliver practical service delivery options to tackle these problems.

An online survey was designed by the [Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit](#) and approved by One Parent Families Scotland. Almost 900 single parents completed the survey in the Spring of 2018. The survey was introduced as aiming to find out more about the nature of the challenges that single parents face in Scotland and to explore what could be done to address them. One of the core aims of the project was to consider how online resources might be used more effectively to tackle social isolation and loneliness. The numbers that are reported in this briefing have been quality assured, including weighting some results to ensure that they are representative of single parents in Scotland, as a whole. Twelve in-depth interviews were also undertaken across Scotland to explore the key issues in greater depth. The anonymity of participating parents is protected in this briefing. More details about the research can be provided on request.

Findings - What's the big picture?

The survey was shared widely by many organisations, interest groups and individuals. OPFS was, of course, the key means through which single parents were reached, with more than half of respondents indicating that they found out about the survey from OPFS via its website, Facebook, Twitter, group or direct mail (56%). Given this, it is unlikely that the findings would be representative of all single parents in Scotland when questions related directly to OPFS. On the other hand, as 44% of respondents were not reached via OPFS, it should not be assumed that all single parents were engaging with OPFS or were even aware of the work that it does.

We asked whether single parents had visited the OPFS website. Only one third report that they had (31%). Of the remainder, one in five reported that they had not, but had heard of OPFS (21%). This left almost one half of survey participants who had never heard of OPFS, let alone visited their website (48%).

We asked those single parents who had visited the OPFS website to tell us why they visited. We provided a list of fifteen possible reasons and an 'other' category. The vast majority of single parents visited the OPFS website for a single particular reason (64%). The five most common reasons are reported below, with there being a particular demand for information around the point of separation. It can be seen that the reasons for visiting the OPFS website are shared by other single parents who report using other websites for advice and support.

Top five reasons for visiting OPFS	
Separation	33%
Moving into work	23%
Social security / benefits issues	22%
To connect with other parents	17%
Parenting issues	14%

Top five reasons for visiting other sites	
Separation	31%
Parenting	30%
To connect with other parents	19%
Contact arrangements	13%
Maternity	11%

It is also useful to know how single parents go about finding the information that they need. We identified six strategies and asked how often each was used. While there is a base of using online sources to access advice and support, this is primarily in the form of internet searching and visiting trusted sources of information (such as OPFS). There is some evidence of using more interactive and less formal means, although these are not yet commonplace. On the other hand, two thirds of single parents report that they use more than two of these strategies to source advice and support.

Online support strategies	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most time	Every time
Undertake internet search by self	4%	4%	22%	43%	27%
Visit website of trusted organisation	6%	6%	35%	37%	16%
Make a private SM post to close friends	50%	24%	22%	4%	1%
Make a public post to friends on Social Media	60%	27%	11%	2%	*
Make a public post to an online forum	72%	9%	8%	*	*
Private post to online counselling	85%	9%	6%	*	0

The interviews further confirmed the findings of the survey and allowed for exploration of some of the reasons for these single parents preferences for how they obtained support. Almost all interviewees indicated a level of mistrust in relation to posting in online forums. Reasons cited included inaccuracy of advice from other parents, being judged rather than advised and for older single parents, issues around understanding how to use and navigate online support.

“Other mums [are offering advice in forums] which is fine but it’s not giving you an accurate [advice] well its giving you an accurate for their child but necessarily yours...but I do feel some of the replies can be quiet, there’s no empathy there at all, you need a bit of empathy when you’re replying to someone. I feel like that should maybe be managed a bit better.” (P2)

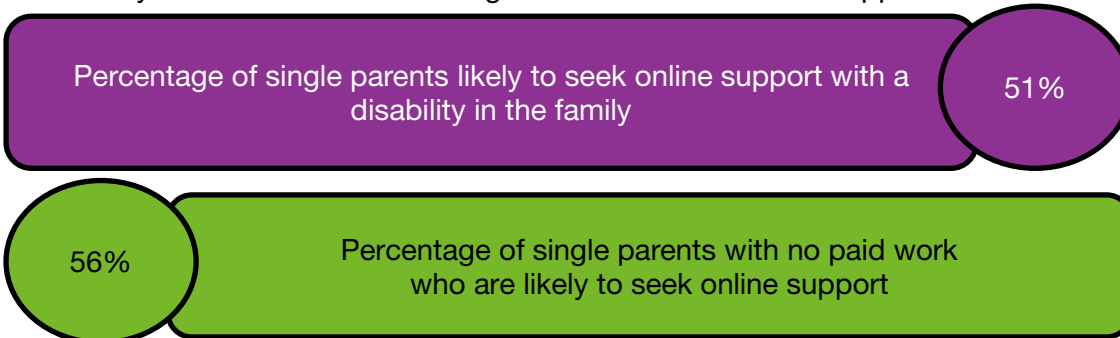
“It was a mental health forum and I felt worse you know they were just saying like I feel terrible and I thought I’m on this to feel better and I actually just I just came out of it and you know this is not for me but I’m I am way of going back onto these forums.” (P3, older)

Finally, we wanted to know why single parents were not making more use of online advice and support services. We identified eight possible reasons and offered the opportunity to also indicate other reasons. Although there are clearly issues to address if online advice and support is to work more effectively, there does not seem to be a widespread resistance to what this could offer.

Reasons for not using online support	Percentage of respondents
Already make good use of online advice and support	27%
Don't know where to find information	22%
Not a helpful way of getting advice and support	21%
Don't like communicating with people online	19%
Do not have time to seek online advice and support	14%
Have difficulty understanding the information provided	8%
Not good at searching the internet	3%
Do not have access to the internet at home	1%
Other reasons	8%

Findings - Are there key differences among single parents?

There are not too many differences among single parents in terms of the number of online strategies that they would use to seek online advice and support. Quite independently of each other, single parents in families with a disability (compared to those who do not) and full-time working single parents (compared to part-time or non-working single parents) were more likely to use more online strategies to source advice and support.



Conclusion

Although OPFS is reaching a sizeable proportion of single parents in Scotland, there is scope for OPFS to increase their visibility as a source of online advice and support. Single parents tend to seek online advice and support on issues such as separation, parenting and contacting other parents. It is important that single parents continue to access services that offer advice on these issues. Given that prior studies have indicated online support to be successful in decreasing loneliness and isolation, these findings would suggest there is a need to create a service to meet these needs. Furthermore, it is evident that service users are more likely to access this support from a trusted organisation rather than alternative sources such as online forums where issues of trust have been identified.

Referencing this paper

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