

Divorce online: guided by service users

The decision to end a marriage or civil partnership is, of course, a very personal and often painful one. But when a couple embarks on this course of action, our online application can make the process smoother and less traumatic for all involved.

Background

The first stage of the online divorce service for personal applications was available in April 2018. This allowed people to apply for an uncontested divorce, upload evidence and pay online.

In January 2019, we added acknowledgement of service and decree nisi applications online. Later the same year, decree nisi outcomes were added to the digital process too, with the decree absolute application following shortly afterwards.

New scanning technology means that any paperwork sent related to online applications is placed on the digital court file automatically. Alongside this, we developed an online system for legal representatives to apply for divorce on behalf of a client.

User feedback has been vital to the successful development of the project and has taken many forms, including inviting users to complete a short online survey after making their divorce application, which lead to important changes.

Clear feedback

Through survey responses many users expressed their need to take a break and compose themselves during the application. They highlighted that the process required the disclosure of many sensitive issues, ranging from instances of domestic abuse or infidelity, to an account of how the divorcing couple drifted away from one another.

Recounting such issues is a great emotional strain for many and often cannot be completed in a single sitting.

Acknowledging the importance of incorporating a 'Save and Return' function into the service, the project team worked with technical colleagues to implement a solution where divorce applicants can save their application at any point in the user journey and return later, rather than having to start again from scratch.

Another example of a change being initiated by feedback from users of the service was when legal professionals recommended the introduction of a standardised platform for the processing of entitlement orders, standardising

the categories for refusal across all regions.

In both cases, once the changes had been made the project team continued to engage with service users through user experience (UX) research sessions held at HMCTS' UX laboratory.

Impact

The changes made as a result of feedback were integral to building a quality online service, which will continue to develop and evolve.

Currently, 70% of all new divorce applications in England & Wales are being submitted online. It takes half the time to fill in as the old paper forms. As a result, we return less than 1% of online applications because of user error, compared to 40% in the old system.

Since 2018, more than 80,000 applications have been received with more than 8 out of 10 users saying they were satisfied or very satisfied with the service (an 87% satisfaction rate).

Strong reciprocal engagement with service users and other stakeholders has been integral to the success of this project.

The online divorce [test] has been a triumphant success and shows, to my mind conclusively, that this is – must be – the way of the future.

– Sir James Munby, President of the Family Division until July 2018

Below are some examples of user feedback on the revised service:

Perfect and stress-free.

Everything was straight forward and easy to follow.

It was so straightforward and easy to understand, it was very easy to complete.

This service is excellent. Very user friendly.

To be honest I think it was a brilliant service, so easy and simple to use with no stress. So, I wouldn't change anything.

What is next?

We will start the design and development required for changing the digital service to accommodate the new divorce legislation that will come in from October 2021.

Further information

[Apply for a divorce online](#)

[New legislation to overhaul divorce law](#)

[HMCTS Reform projects explained](#)

[HMCTS engagement groups](#)

[Engaging with our external stakeholders – our approach and plans](#)