Centre for Ageing Better

How has COVID-19 changed the landscape of digital inclusion?

Briefing

August 2020

COVID-19 has exposed our digital divides

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing trend towards digital technology was already changing the way we do things as a society – with access to services, information and support increasingly going 'digital by default'. The outbreak of coronavirus and the subsequent lockdown has accelerated this shift to digital technology. Our ability to work from home, search for a job, stay connected with family or friends, take part in volunteering, shop for groceries and other essential items, attend healthcare appointments, access financial support and banking services, and keep physically active have all – to varying degrees – been dependent on our ability to get online.

COVID-19 has spurred many more people to get online or to use the internet in new ways compared to before the outbreak. For example, among 50-70 year olds, three quarters (75%) say they were making video calls more often during lockdown and three in ten (31%) said they were emailing more than they did before the pandemic struck.[1] A survey by Lloyds Bank found that three times more 70-year-olds registered for online banking during lockdown compared to the same time last year.[2]

At the same time, the pandemic has further exposed and deepened the divide between the digital haves and have nots. Many activities, information and services have moved exclusively online without offering offline alternatives or with offline alternatives being limited or restricted. This has placed those without digital access at even greater risk of missing out than before the outbreak.

> **Who should read this paper?**
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> This briefing is for Government, local authorities, funders and providers of online training and support, and for any businesses or organisations delivering online services.
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> It provides a summary of what digital exclusion means and who is most affected, and it looks at how COVID-19 has changed the landscape of digital exclusion.
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> It includes principles for supporting people to get online and makes recommendations for change needed to happen to ensure fewer people end up on the wrong side of the digital divide.

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[1] Ipsos MORI & The Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'The experience of people approaching later life in lockdown: The impact of COVID-19 on 50-70-year olds in England'. Available from: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/experience-people-approaching-later-life-lockdown-impact-covid-19-50-70-year-olds

[2] Lloyds Bank (2020), 'Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020'. Available from: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf

What do we mean by digital inclusion?

Digital inclusion is about ensuring people are able to use the internet and online technologies to meet their needs. This includes:

– **Infrastructure** – being able to afford or have access to a device (whether a mobile phone, tablet or computer), as well as being able to afford or have access to the internet through broadband, Wi-Fi or mobile data.

– **Skills** – having the ability, confidence and digital skills to use digital devices and the internet.

– **Accessibility** – having access to services that are designed to meet users' needs, including for individuals with disabilities that require assistive technology to get online.
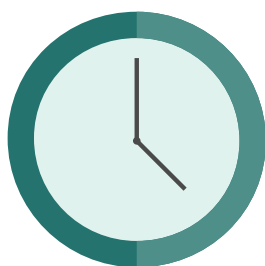
People in mid to later life are at greater risk of being on the wrong side of the digital divide

In general, there has been a rapid increase in the numbers of people aged 55 and over who are now online. For example, in 2011, just over half (52%) of people aged 65-74 had recently used the internet. This figure jumped to eight in ten (83%) by 2019.[3]

However, despite these increases, many people still are not online, and age remains the biggest predictor of whether or not someone is digitally included. In 2019, there were 4 million people who had never used the internet. Of these, the vast majority (3.7 million) are aged 55 and over.[4]

Those who are not online are not just older, they are also likely to be in worse health, poorer and less well educated than their peers: 71% of those offline have no more than a secondary education, and nearly half (47%) are from low-income households.[5] These individuals often have a key need to use the internet, but have limited or no access to offline alternatives and are disadvantaged because of it. For example, workers who are digitally enabled earn, on average, an additional of £2,160 per year compared to workers who are not digitally enabled.[6]

[3] Office for National Statistics (2019), 'Internet users, UK: 2019'. Available from: https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2019

[4] Office for National Statistics (2019), 'Internet users, UK: 2019'. Available from: https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2019

[5] Lloyds Bank (2019), 'UK Consumer Digital Index 2019'. Available from: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/LB-Consumer-Digital-Index-2019-Report.pdf

[6] Lloyds Bank (2020), 'Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020'. Available from: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf

Digital exclusion is not something that will go away with time

Digital exclusion is likely to remain a problem in the future for a number of reasons:

– Many of those currently not online will remain offline – a lot of whom will live another 20 or 30 years. A survey done by Lloyds Bank found that almost half (48%) of those digitally excluded said 'nothing' could motivate them to get online.[7]

– There will be a residual core that will always struggle to get online regardless of age – a fifth of those who have not used the internet within the past three months are under the age of 50. These are often people from less educated and lower socioeconomic backgrounds or who have learning difficulties.

– Digital technology is continually developing and therefore has the potential to continue to leave people behind. Retirement is often a key timepoint when exposure to or usage of technology changes or reduces.

The nature of digital exclusion is also changing. Now, and even more so in the future, it is less about whether you have the capability to get online and more about what you are doing online and how useful this is to your life. For example, someone may own a smartphone and be able to video call their family members, but they may still lack the skills to access online banking or book a health appointment online.

Factors influencing internet usage in later life

Centre for Ageing Better research has identified multiple and complex barriers that individuals in later life face in getting online, including:[8]

– **Self-efficacy**: The most significant barrier non-users face in getting online is a belief that they are not capable of doing so. Many have a real fear of 'the internet' and a lack of confidence in being able to navigate it, particularly when functionality and navigation is not consistent.

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[7] Lloyds Bank (2020), 'Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020'. Available from: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf

[8] Centre for Ageing Better (2018), 'The digital age: new approaches to supporting people in later life get online'. Available from: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/digital-age

– **Awareness of benefits**: An individual's understanding the benefits of being online does little to change their attitudes or behaviour. Non-users with a detailed understanding of the benefits might still choose not to engage.

– **Awareness of risks**: Most people are concerned about the risks of being online – typically the security of personal financial information. However, awareness of risks is not in itself a key barrier to engagement. Instead, it is 'another reason not to get online' and will most likely limit users' online activity.

– **Employment history**: People with limited exposure to computers and the internet during their working lives are often far less confident with them, although this can also be due to a lack of interest rather than opportunity.

– **Perception of cognitive ability**: People's perception of their own cognitive ability – often clouded by internalised ageism or stereotypes about age – is more important than their actual cognitive ability. Cultural assumptions and the stereotype that 'older people can't learn to use computers' can damage people's self-efficacy and willingness to use the internet.

– **Influence of family**: Family members can play an enabling or disabling role. Oftentimes family enable access by purchasing and setting up technology or by providing troubleshooting help. Other times family support is not helpful and can damage self-efficacy and confidence. Families can also act as a proxy, doing things on behalf of other family members, which can lead to a lack of learning or may lead to significant difficulties if individuals lose their proxy.

– **Perceived value and relevance**: Lack of exposure to the internet over the life course can affect how relevant or valuable people perceive online access to be. Many people prefer offline alternatives or view themselves as fundamentally different from 'an internet user'.

– **Access and affordability of equipment**: Although not a significant barrier identified in our initial research, with community provision (such as in libraries and community centres) and offline alternatives (such as face-to-face services) disappearing during the pandemic, access to a device and the internet has become a more important factor.

Principles for supporting people in mid to later life to get online

While the ways in which we engage people with digital inclusion support need to be tailored to individual needs and interests, when it comes to delivering support there are some consistent principles of good practice that can be applied:[9]

1. **Flexibility and relevance**: Structured, skills-focused courses rarely work. Instead concentrate on helping people to do the things they need and want to do online.

2. **The right pace**: Older learners will pick up information and will progress their learning at different paces – a responsive approach is key.

3. **Repetition and reflection**: Creating space for repetition and reflection on success is vital to success.

4. **The right language**: Avoid jargon and focus on the task, not the tech.

5. **One-to-one support**: A strong teacher-student relationship is key to building a learner's confidence.

6. **Time to build relationships**: Taking time to build communication and trust helps to maintain learners' interest in digital and increase their self-efficacy.

7. **Ongoing support**: Support needs to be open-ended, allowing learners to return with questions and problems.

8. **Co-design**: Involve a wide range of users in the shaping and design of all services, new and existing, to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.

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[9] Centre for Ageing Better (2018), 'The digital age: new approaches to supporting people in later life get online'. Available from: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/digital-age

How has COVID-19 changed the landscape of digital inclusion for people in mid to later life?

The ability to get online during the pandemic has impacted nearly every area of our lives. Here, we look at four key areas and what the outbreak has meant for people in mid to later life who are digitally excluded:

Work

– **Searching for work**: With unprecedented numbers of people unemployed due to the pandemic and many stuck at home during lockdown, being able to search for and apply to jobs online from home has been crucial. Yet many people over 50 still rely on word of mouth and adverts to look for job roles. Less digitally confident jobseekers will struggle to search for and apply to jobs online.[10] Those who rely on computers at libraries or community centres for online access that closed during lockdown will have struggled to search for and apply to jobs. With social distancing measures still in place, many interviews have moved online, leaving those who are digitally excluded at a significant disadvantage.

Only 23% of the UK workforce have received digital skills training and support from their employer.

(Lloyds Bank, 2020)
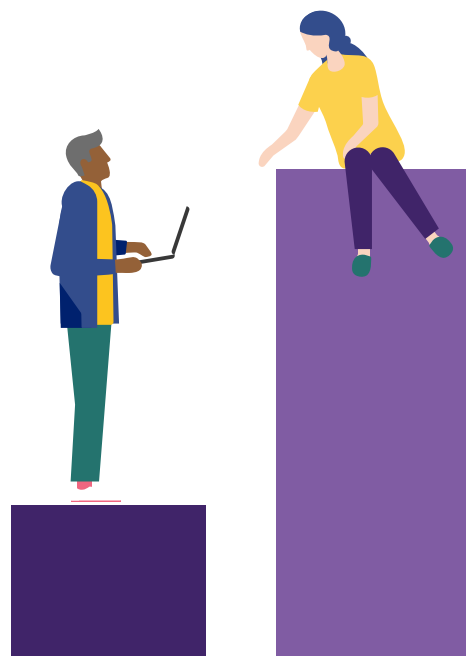
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[10] Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'Back on track: Improving employment support for over 50s jobseekers'. Available from: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/back-track-improving-employment-support-over-50s-jobseekers

– **Employment support**: When lockdown began, many elements of employment support moved online or to video calls. Centre for Ageing Better research found that some older adults without access to a computer or unable to confidently use one were not able to fully take up remote support.[11] Most Jobcentres continued to assist those unable to get online but only provided basic support, had shorter calls and could not help with job searches or applications. If social distancing continues, Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches and Employment Advisors will need to be trained on how to support their clients back into work through remote and digital support.

– **Claiming benefits**: With conditionality re-introduced for Universal Credit, proof of job search will be required for claimants. Digitally excluded older adults could be at risk of losing their benefit entitlement if they can't easily prove they've been searching for jobs. Those without online access and digital skills will have received the least support to search for and apply to jobs and yet will be at highest risk of losing their benefits.

– **Reskilling**: Centre for Ageing Better research found that while many older workers are confident using digital devices for social purposes, they are less confident using them for work-based tasks, leaving them at a significant disadvantage in the job market.[12] If unemployment due to the pandemic continues to rise and industries that were already in decline do not recover, access to digital skills will be even more important for those seeking to retrain.

Housing

– **Internet connectivity**: Given the pandemic has forced so many of us to stay at home for long periods of time, access to internet in the home has been fundamental to our ability to remain socially connected, work from home, search for jobs and access services during lockdown. Yet many older people live in homes that still don't have internet access, and the cost of additional data can be prohibitive.

Health

– **Physical activity**: Social distancing measures have meant many more people spending more time at home and for many, as a result, becoming less physically active. A massive number of online resources have been developed to support people to remain physically active while at home.

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[11] Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'Back on track: Improving employment support for over 50s jobseekers'. Available from: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/back-track-improving-employment-support-over-50s-jobseekers

[12] Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'Back on track: Improving employment support for over 50s jobseekers'. Available from: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/back-track-improving-employment-support-over-50s-jobseekers

Although some resources have been developed for people who aren't online – for example exercise classes on the radio or TV or leaflets distributed to people's home[13, 14] – these are significantly more limited in variety and harder to access offline.

– **Telehealth and telecare**: The pandemic moved many more consultations with healthcare professionals to a virtual setting.[15] A shift in provision of healthcare services to digital platforms often excludes those who are older and poorer. An evaluation of the GP At Hand service found that the patients who took up the service were younger (94% aged under 45) and two-thirds were living in areas with high proportions of affluent categories. They were also typically healthier than the average.[16]

– **Health information about COVID-19**: As our knowledge about COVID-19 and the Government's response to it continues to evolve, much of the information and guidance about the pandemic is largely online. For example, although it is possible to order a test over the phone, the instructions on how to do so and what to do next is largely online. It is important that the Government continues to ensure that information and services are accessible to those not online by making telephone channels available to these individuals.

Communities

– **Access to equipment and internet**: With libraries and other sources of free Wi-Fi closed during lockdown, some people without a device or access to the internet (usually those from poorer backgrounds) lost their online access.[17] For others, the sudden closure of face-to-face services and social distancing measures will have resulted in a new need for digital equipment and the internet. Some local areas acted quickly to get digital technology to older residents. For example, Barnsley Council installed video systems and user guides onto over 100 old laptops and iPads to

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[13] Public Health England (2020), 'Active at Home'. Available at: https://campaignresources. phe.gov.uk/resources/campaigns/50-resource-ordering/resources/5118

[14] Demos et al (2020), 10Today: Physical activity for older people. Available at: https://www. bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/p087wddm

[15] Guardian (2020), 'GP appointments by phone and video surge during coronavirus lockdown', 5 July 2020. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/ jul/05/gp-appointments-phone-video-coronavirus-lockdown-nhs

[16] Ipsos MORI and York Health Economics Consortium (2019), 'Evaluation of Babylon GP at hand'. Available from: https://www.hammersmithfulhamccg.nhs.uk/media/156123/ Evaluation-of-Babylon-GP-at-Hand-Final-Report.pdf

[17] Good Things Foundation (2020), 'Financial exclusion and digital exclusion often go hand in hand', 26 June 2020. Available from: https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/news-and-blogs/blog/financial-and-digital-exclusion-often-go-hand-in-hand

distribute to care homes across the borough.[18] While this may have helped overcome the practical barrier of a lack of equipment to get online, it might not be enough if older adults don't have the skills or the confidence to use digital technology.

– **Community participation**: When the pandemic first hit, many local community groups switched to meeting and supporting people virtually. In Leeds, after discovering many of its members had never been on a video call before, one neighbourhood network provided over the phone training sessions on how to use Zoom for video calling so that members could join online coffee mornings, quizzes, IT classes and singing groups.[19] For those people who are able to get online, virtual activities have been a crucial factor in helping them maintain social connections. However, those who are less well connected will be at greater risk of being left behind. Some organisations have acknowledged this challenge and are also offering befriending services and welfare checks over the phone.

– **Move to online only services**: The move to virtual banking, shopping and public services was already occurring before the pandemic struck, but this trend was massively accelerated during the coronavirus outbreak. As many services move to 'digital by default', it's important for service providers to remember their responsibility to people who are offline. With tight budgets and lack of investment, service providers should not view closing offline services as a solution to budget constraints and should sustain multiple ways for people to access. Local authorities in particular have a statutory role to play to futureproof communities experiencing demographic and digital shifts.

18 Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'How Barnsley is using recycled tech to support its local care homes'. Available from: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/case-studies/how-barnsley-using-recycled-tech-support-local-care-homes

19 Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'How Leeds is utilising virtual coffee mornings during the COVID-19 pandemic'. Available from: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/case-studies/how-leeds-utilising-virtual-coffee-mornings-covid-pandemic

Gaps in the evidence: what we don't yet know

How can we remotely support people to get online if social distancing measures remain in place or have to be reinstated?

No one knows how long the COVID-19 crisis will continue. We urgently need to find new ways of increasing digital skills and confidence without face-to-face training. Many local community groups and online centres have done great work to continue to support people, but this has been difficult at a distance. Some people have used their support networks and family to help with basic training and access to technology, but we need to find more alternatives and good practice examples of how to remotely support people to get online.

How can we identify those who are most excluded and in need of support?

We need to find better ways of identifying individuals at a local level who are at greatest risk of digital exclusion and in need of support. These can include individuals who are unemployed, in social housing, living with disabilities, on lower incomes, less educated, living in rural areas and those whose first language isn't English and who aren't always known to local public services or community groups.

How does being online impact wellbeing?

Although there have been some studies on how being online can help improve quality of life and reduce household spending, we need more research into the broader benefits of being online. Digital cannot replace face-to-face relationships, and we need to identify how, for whom and when using technology is most beneficial to maintaining our social connections, supporting our health and finances, and finding meaning and purpose (whether through work or contributing to our community) – all of which impact our wellbeing as we grow older.

What basic adjustments can we make to existing technology to improve digital skills?

Lots of technology that aims to help digitally excluded people can be complex and expensive. Rather than designing and creating new technology, we need to look at how basic adjustments to what already exists can improve digital skills and make people feel more confident using technology. For example, this could include technology that guides the user through a process in a really simple way or clearly highlights potentially fraudulent links.

Whose responsibility is it to lead on tackling digital exclusion?

National government, including the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Government Digital Service, the Office for Civil Society and others have responsibility on a national level, yet training and provision is often provided in a more fragmented way by businesses, local authorities and charities. COVID-19 has further exposed society's digital and social divides, which calls for national leadership on this issue with local authorities taking the lead at a local level. Public bodies already have a duty to ensure no one is left behind or discriminated against due to digital exclusion, so the spotlight thrown on these issues by COVID-19 deserves priority attention in the recovery period.

Recommendations

There is an urgent need to address the digital divide – exacerbated by COVID-19 – that has led to countless numbers of people missing out on access to essential services, information and support online.

These recommendations are for national government, local authorities, funders and providers of online training and support and for any businesses or organisations delivering online services.

Make provisions for those not online:

An estimated 4 million people in the UK are completely offline. Government, public and community services and businesses must remember their responsibility to those who are not online. They should offer support or an offline equivalent (e.g. via telephone) for people without the necessary digital skills or technology. Important communications such as public health messages related to COVID-19 should be distributed in paper form in key locations such as supermarkets, libraries and GP surgeries, and in the event of future lockdowns, finding ways of directly contacting individuals who aren't able to leave their home.

Make technology accessible:

Hardware and websites must also be designed in an accessible way – meaning making something that can be used by as many people as possible, regardless of environment, device being used, age, ability or cultural background. create and deliver accessible websites in a timely manner.

Provide equipment and internet access:

National government and local authorities should commit to universal access to the internet by working to expand access to broadband, data/ telephone packages, and to computer and IT packages, in particular for individuals and families on low incomes who have the greatest need and are most likely to be digitally excluded.

Invest in building digital skills:

Making sure digital services are accessible and providing access to equipment and the internet will not be effective if people cannot use the technology or if they see tech as a barrier. Government and service providers should invest in schemes to support those who are digitally excluded to get online using good practice. such as those developed with the Good Things Foundation, Citizens Online, Digital Unite, and Barclays.

Provide a central resource bank for digital champions:

There is a wealth of resources available for anyone providing digital training or support, but those new to providing support are often unaware of what is available. Government should promote joined up working for anyone supporting digital inclusion and should create a resource bank that signposts to all the available resources from one central place.

Integrate digital skill assessments into other support:

Providers of services – for example employment or GP services – should look at assessing digital skills as part of other support services. This would help identify individuals who aren't online and need help and then offering support or signposting them to interventions.

Let's take action today for all our tomorrows.
Let's make ageing better.