

POLICY POSITION PAPER - DIGITAL INCLUSION - COPA (Cymru Older Peoples Alliance)

Introduction

Digital Inclusion or Exclusion?

1. The contribution of information technology to people's ability to communicate during the Pandemic has attracted much attention. How many had heard of Zoom, or Teams or portals - perhaps just those working in IT or interested in all things digital?
2. We can say it has made a significant difference but to whom? Has any group or groups been left behind? Excluded? How many people have watched television and heard the phrase 'To find out more visit www.something.' More and more people are going 'online' to shop, bank, arrange their visit to a GP, book a holiday, organise the delivery of their shopping etc.
3. It has been estimated that 9 million people in the UK are unable to visit the internet, use a desktop, laptop, or tablet. Digital exclusion is a major problem for older people and the disabled, as well as those on low incomes who lack the financial power to get 'online'.
4. Promoting digital inclusion could have numerous benefits for internet non-users, but it should be acknowledged that there are a significant number of people who just are not interested.

The following could be said to be positive reasons for using the internet:

- a. The Internet gives us access to knowledge, information, and learning opportunities.
- b. It connects us to other people in ways that were not possible in the past.
- c. Supportive communities develop online because of the Internet.
- d. We can manage our finances more effectively because of the Internet.
- e. The Internet helps us to find where we need to go.
- f. The Internet allows us to shop for what we need online.
- g. We can create employment opportunities because of the Internet and being 'internet able' can get you a better job.
- h. Having an Internet connection available makes it possible for people to work from home or to operate a virtual office.
- i. The Internet provides us with plenty of entertainment options.
- J. The Internet makes many of our devices become connected and smarter because of their online design. You can connect a thermostat to control the heating and cooling of your home remotely or automatically. Your locks, lights, and outlets can receive the same upgrade.

There are also many reasons for ensuring that people are taught to immerse themselves in the digital world with care. The whole issue of safeguarding needs to be stressed for careful consideration of safe use off the internet (See <https://www.caerphillyover50.co.uk/online-safety/>).

Background

5. There is a range of evidence published (see footnote) that reflects that digital exclusion is a major problem for older people, particularly those over 75 and those on low incomes.
6. The gap between the proportion of internet users over the age of 65 years and younger age groups is narrowing for both men and women. However, Office of National Statistics figures show the over 65s make up an increasingly high proportion of internet non-users. 79% of non-users in 2018 were 65 or over, with 55% over the age of 75. A higher percentage of lone households with an adult aged 65 and over do not have an internet connection.
7. A lack of skills has also been reported by many older people who express the feeling that it is simply too late in life for them to start learning digital skills. In 2018, Wales had the lowest proportion of people with all five basic digital skills (66%) and the highest proportion of those with zero basic digital skills (19%)
8. What are Essential Digital skills?
 - Using devices and handling information
 - Creating and editing writing and storing files
 - Communicating using email, Skype, Facebook, Zoom etc
 - Transacting shopping online
 - Being safe and responsible online.
9. It is not only the older person disadvantaged from fully integrating into the digital revolution impacting all our lives with so many banks, post offices, also closing branches through lack of 'footfall' - customers using them; online shopping; applying for benefits, job applications; cheaper deals for electricity and gas etc are all increasingly becoming accessible on-line only. The financial crisis and the effect of the Pandemic are seeing more and more people disadvantaged because of their poverty – inflation, food costing more, energy likewise, together with the initial cost of computers broadband tariffs and oncosts of online memberships. This so called “digital poverty” has a significant impact on the lives of older people who are not able to access services on -line in many aspects of life.
10. *Online security for older people is a vital issue to address.* Increasing “scams” on email, Websites, smartphones etc can pose a real threat to the financial security

of even the most knowledgeable of digital users. For those who are not so comfortable with digital use, the concerns about security online are greater. There are risks of misinformation, cybercrimes, safety, and privacy issues that must also be addressed if the digital divide is not to continue to disadvantage older people. (See <https://www.caerphillyover50.co.uk/online-safety/>)

11. The level of digital exclusion in Wales is higher than in the rest of the UK, with as many as 7% of the population, or 180,000 people, not using the internet. Digitally excluded people are some of the heaviest users of health and social care services, so risk being left behind in the digital health revolution. The older and more financially disadvantaged we are, the less likely we are to have quick and easy access to the internet.

12. The UK Consumer Digital Index 2020 report by Lloyds Bank found:

- 25% of people who were not online thought it was too expensive
- 38% spend money on other things

Lloyds conceded cost is still a barrier to people getting online, saying **up to 53%** of those currently offline may struggle to afford broadband.

Of those not connected, Lloyds found:

- 21% thought the benefits of being online were unclear
- 36% said they have no interest
- 48% are not interested at all and see no point in being online. The same study found that men were less interested than women.

13. For whatever reason there are certain groups more at risk of exclusion than for financial or lack of motivation. According to the economists Cebr that

‘without further intervention in building basic digital skills an estimated 5.8 million people will remain digitally excluded by the end of 2032, of whom 3.7 million are aged 75 years or older..... failure to invest in tackling digital exclusion will directly undermine pretty well everything else on that priority list: employment, education, economic growth, social cohesion, democratic participation, public health, adult social care, sustainability, creative and tech industries and more.’

14. Digitally excluded people are likely to be:

Older adults: There is a higher proportion of digitally excluded people in older age groups. Only 41% of people over 75 have basic digital skills, compared with 87% of 16–49-year-olds.

People in rural areas: People living in rural areas who are not online are usually excluded due to problems in broadband provision, both for fixed line and mobile broadband services. There are still many areas of Wales affected by ‘not-spots’,

(where for some reason internet reception is poor or intermittent or not available at all) although the prevalence of these is reported to be diminishing.

Welsh speaking people and others who do not use English as their first language: Digital systems and their associated support processes need to be designed to accommodate the needs of Welsh speakers and speakers of common minority languages. This does require consideration in how services are implemented and supported.

Socially isolated and lonely people: Digital exclusion can be a facet of other social issues faced by individuals, for example, those facing social isolation and loneliness may also be excluded from digital interaction.

15. What is clear is that the digitally excluded will need sustained support with devices, data, and digital skills. Meanwhile cost of living pressures make internet access harder for even those who have the skills already.
16. Digital inclusion may never rise to the top, but failure to invest in tackling digital exclusion will directly undermine everything else on that priority list: employment, education, economic growth, social cohesion, democratic participation, public health, adult social care, sustainability, creative and tech industries and more.
17. The exclusion of so many is also an opportunity for tech industry to design more user-friendly devices. We desire to see a Wales where everyone has the freedom to gain the skills, access, and motivation to be a confident user of digital technology.

What do COPA Want?

- Guidance on 'Ensuring access to information and services in a digital age' that has been issued to local authorities and health boards in Wales under Section 12 of the Commissioner for Older People (Wales) Act 2006 should be fully implemented and their performance against the requirements monitored.
- All public, private and third sector bodies in Wales should uphold the principle that older people have the right to access and gather information and to seek information and advice using **both** digital and non-digital means.
- Public bodies should implement measures to ensure that the human rights of older people are protected and that they are enabled to access information and get to the services they need by offline channels, or should they choose on-line, are supported to gain the skills and confidence to be able to connect online.
- A concerted effort to ensure a range of flexible training is available locally for older people to become informed and confident users of digital services.
- Local authorities and third sector to provide technical support for older people who are new online users or those wishing to learn about getting online. Local

hubs and community facilities could be drop-in centres, internet cafes and virtual village halls.

- Greater priority is needed to ensure that older people have their digital security protected from scams and other fraudulent action and that awareness of this issue is included in all advice on accessing digital services.
- More research is needed to better understand the issues of why digital exclusion is a major problem for older people.
- Local Authorities to support Community Hubs and public libraries, to enable them to serve as an information point and provide further details about accessing support, either by telephone or in a pre-arranged face-to-face meeting. In rural areas with mobile libraries reserve space for information points.
- Local Authorities work with Third Sector and donors to operate loan schemes or 'try before you buy' schemes with tablets preloaded with 'dongles' where connectivity is an issue.
- Welsh Government to encourage all public bodies as well as banks, building societies and communication companies to invest in digital champions as part of customer service to help the public (and especially older people) to use computers, tablets, and mobile phones.

18. The Commissioner for Older People is among those championing the cause of making Wales a nation that communicates and emphasises that older people are still facing significant challenges, including the cost-of-living crisis, which means it is vitally important that they can access the information and services they need – COPA wants Wales to be a nation that communicates by both digital and non-digital means.

Cymru Older Peoples Alliance

March 2023

References

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Digital Communities Wales

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Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index -
[UK Consumer Digital Index 2020 | Lloyds Bank](#)

Office for National Statistics [Home - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

Older Peoples Commissioner (Wales)

[Contact the Commissioner's Advice and Assistance Team - Older People's Commissioner for Wales](#)

Safety Online article Caerphilly 50+ Forum

<https://www.caerphillyover50.co.uk/online-safety/>