evidence to the Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into digital exclusion and the cost of living

March 2023

tailored to their needs and preferences, and often this is most effective when delivered on a one-to-one basis. Civil society organisations require greater resources if they are to extend their reach to more excluded people.

About Age UK

Age UK is a national charity that works with a network of partners, including Age Scotland,

What are the main causes of digital exclusion in the UK? What is the economic and social impact?

Older people who are not online are digitally excluded for a number of inter-related reasons. Many say using the internet is not something they need or are interested in. Some people have made an informed decision about this, but others may not appreciate the benefits that being online could bring. Another important factor is the lack of digital skills. Gaining and retaining digital skills in a world where technology is always changing can be challenging, particularly when people have not been brought up using the internet.

While lack of motivation and lack of digital skills are key barriers, other factors also contribute to digital exclusion. These include:

Concerns about security and the risk of scams especially when someone has previously been a victim of online fraud or knows others who have been scammed. The cost of equipment and connection charges – both in terms of basic affordability and whether it is value for money if they will only make limited use of the internet. Health impairments including physical limitations and cognitive decline can make it harder for people to use technology or to gain and retain skills. (Although technology can also improve the lives of disabled people.)

Some of these issues are illustrated by the comments below from older people interviewed by Age UK as part of a project looking at the experiences of people who do not use the internet or only use it to a limited extent.[iii]

---

*⅃S̃ã•Áɛ^Áãⅰ|ãɛ̯ o̯ɛ̯ɛ̯ɛ̯Á&@[|[* ̂Ễc@ˆÁ ^¦^á¦ˇ*@Á]Á}Á/̃ūⅢ̃ o̯Á-¯•̃ãɛ}φÁ ç̯}Áɛ̯ç^Á@ç̯^Áɛ̯ɛ̯ telephone when we were young̯È*

⅃Y̯^ɛ̯c^Áɛ̯ɛ̯^Áɛ̯ã̯^å̯ˇ^}^¦æɛ̯}Ễc@ç̯^Á [¦^Áã̯^ÈÝ̃ˇÁ æ̯}æ^Áɛ̯Á[¦c̯Á[¦ˇ|-¯Á ˇ ⅢÈ̃ã̯ˇ•^Á mother who has children and is working doesn̯φ̯Á@ç̯^Áɛ@̯ã̯^ÈÝ̃@[ˇ}*^¦Á^}^¦æɛ̯}Á æ̯^Áɛ̯ɛ̯ˇ•̯^Á}^¦æɛ̯}̯È̯Á*

⅃Ⅽ̯ɛ̯]̯ not into this technical business, I refuse to be bullied into having a computer'.

*⅃Ⅽ̯c@ ̯\̯Ⅽ@̯ɛ̯ ç^¦}^å ̯Áɛ̯ɛ̯ã̯ã̯¦̯ã̯ @̯^}̯ã̯*Á¦¦̯^Á^ɛ̯æ̯|̯ˆỄ[ˇÁ@æ̯Á[¦̯ æ̯}̯Áɛ̯c@̯*̯•̯Á[̯ã̯*Á}̯È̯ the s&æ̯ ̯•̯Áɛ̯}̯å̯ã̯ã̯-̯^¦̯^}̯o̯Ⅽ̯c@̯*̯•̯È̯ʲ*

The impact of digital exclusion

The impact of digital exclusion for individuals varies depending on their situation and how they want to

provides parking concessions to people with disabilities or health conditions). In most areas there was strong encouragement to access council services digitally and some organisations told us there were no alternative ways of applying. Even when there were offline options, these could be difficult to access, or people were not informed about them. One Age UK told us they 'have to argue with council staff to get paper forms.'[vi]

In health services too we see an increasing reliance on digital access and more limited face-to-face services creating barriers for those with limited digital skills. For example,

this requires providing information about their income, savings, and bank account details. Furthermore, many people want to remain in control of their own lives. It is not reasonable to design services on the presumption that people can access trustworthy help, and doing so risks excluding those who cannot.

A woman contacted Age UK to say her mother had been in tears on the phone because she wanted to be independent but was feeling increasingly excluded and incapable as she was not online. Her GP surgery had stopped taking orders for repeat prescriptions over the telephone and this was on top of many companies moving services online.

The move to access services online, such as applying for a Blue Badge, is also putting additional pressure on local advice services provided by organisations including Age UK. While supporting people to get the help they need is an important role for information and advice services, some older people who approach their local Age UK for help to apply for support online could do so on their own if there was an easy offline option. This would free up time for staff and volunteers to support other older people in need and would also prevent individuals having to be dependent on others. In some cases, councils routinely refer applicants to their local Age UK, in spite of not providing any additional funding to meet the additional demand for help.

How has the rising cost of living affected digital exclusion?
a)To what extent does digital exclusion exacerbate cost of living pressures?
b)What are the long-term implications of this relationship?

In the Lloyds 2022 Essential Digital Skills Study over a third of people (35%) said that the rising cost of living was impacting their ability to go online[viii] and Ofcom reported that in October 2022 around one in three (32%) households surveyed said they had difficulty affording a communication service.[ix]

We know from the feedback we receive 0.8 8ny cnervi2ople

in-3(re)9 s(n)tru2(g)6(e)g3(li)4(n)6((g)-3 t)-3(o)-3( )8(a)-6(e)-3(e)6(t)-3(th)5(sing)-5( )]preces.

online, there are also potential savings from finding bargains and getting the best deals, for example when renewing insurance. This could prompt some people to find out more about gaining digital skills.

What are the obstacles to greater digital inclusion? Where is policy intervention likely to have the greatest impact over the next 12 months and 5 years?
a)To what extent would these changes help unlock economic growth?

How effective are Government initiatives at addressing digital exclusion? What further action is needed, and what should be done to provide offline access to services?

For those older people who are interested in getting online, access to appropriate support to gain digital skills is a major barrier. Adults who do not have the digital skills needed for work and day to day life may be able to get free training leading to an essential digital skills qualification under the statutory digital entitlement. However, such programmes do not meet the needs of many retired people who generally do not want a qualification or to be made to feel they are going back to school.

It is important that training meets the needs of those people in their 50s and early 60s who are out of the labour market but would like to return and would benefit from upgrading their digital skills given that so many jobs now require some familiarity

Equality Duty means public bodies should be meeting the needs of those with protected characteristics which include age and disability. Equality considerations should be reflected in the design of policies and the delivery of services. As digital exclusion is linked to both age and

tailored to their needs and preferences, and often this is most effective when delivered on a one-to-one basis.

An effective approach is using Digital Champions who are staff and volunteers who have been trained to have the skills and knowledge that they need to support older people in