



# Briefing Paper

## Living in a digital world after Covid-19 – the experiences of older people who don't live their lives online

December 2021

### Introduction

Many people cannot imagine life without the internet and digital technology, especially since the onset of Covid-19 and the restrictions this placed on daily life. However, not everyone can or wants to use the internet or has a smartphone and we know from national survey data there has not been a sea change in the proportion of older people using the internet. We wanted to find out more about the people behind the statistics and explore what life has been like during the pandemic for those who do not use the internet or only use it to a limited degree.

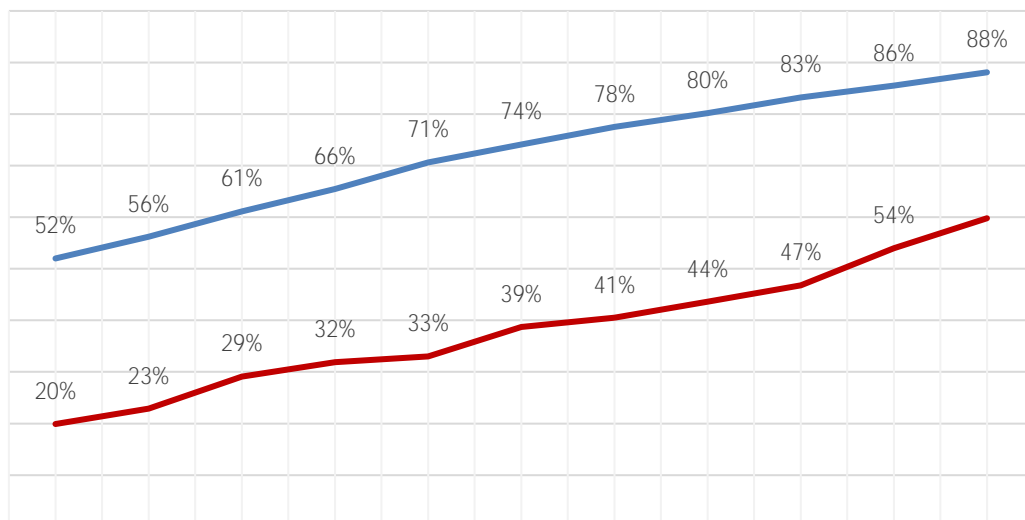


It is essential that those who cannot, or do not want to, use the internet, or do not have a smartphone are not excluded or put at a disadvantage. People must be able to access information, keep in touch, shop, manage their finances, and access public services in ways that suit them.

Consumers who are not online must also be able to manage their accounts and switch (where possible) with essential services provided by the private sector, such as banking, energy, water and communications.

## Internet use before and since the pandemic

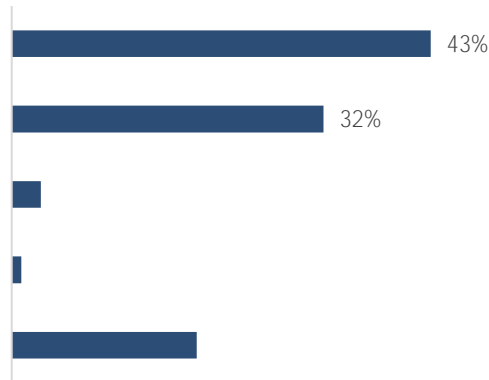
National surveys show that virtually all younger people use the internet, but this reduces with age and those aged 75+ are least likely to be online. And while internet use, including among those aged 75+, has increased over recent years, a substantial minority of older people are still not online as can be seen in the chart below.



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Between early 2020 and early 2021 internet use among those aged 75+ increased from 54% to 60%, broadly in line with trends over recent years. So, while the pandemic may have prompted some people to get online for the first time, it does not appear to have made a substantial difference to the proportion of older people using the internet.

This reinforces previous Age UK analysis looking at internet use in England a few months after the start of the pandemic.<sup>i</sup> Two fifths (39%) of people aged 52 plus in England said they were using the internet more since the onset of coronavirus.



Source: Age UK Your Voice Engagement Panel, May 2021, 525 respondents (2% of respondents did not answer this question).

Among panel members, just under a fifth (19%) said they did not use the internet and had not done so before the pandemic. The most common response (43%) was that they were using it more often, while around a third (32%) said they were using it about the same amount. A very small proportion said they were using it less than before (3%) or had started to use it since the pandemic (1%). This shows that among panel members, few started to use the internet during the pandemic, but many who were already users, turned increasingly to digital technology.

We had asked the same question in November 2020, six months earlier, and found broadly similar results in overall internet use. However, at that stage, earlier in the pandemic, a greater proportion (53%) said they were using it more and 24% were using it about the same amount. While, as above, internet use is still higher for around two-fifths of our panel, for some it appears to have returned to normal - perhaps because people now have more opportunities to get out and about and resume previous activities.

## Interviews with Your Voice Engagement Panel members

We know that for many older people the internet is an essential part of everyday life. Most of our panel members use the internet, with the most common activities among users being getting information (91%), keeping in touch with friends and family (87%), shopping (75%), and banking (65%).<sup>iii</sup>

However, the main purpose of this study was to explore the views and experiences of people who are not online or who use digital technology in a limited way. To do this we carried out 33 telephone calls with panel members who do not use the internet at all (21), only use it a little (5), have been using it less (5), or have started to use it since the pandemic (2). We spoke to around the same number of women and men and their ages ranged from mid 50s to mid 90s.

## **Reasons for not using the internet**

We asked non-users what their main reason is for not using the internet. Their responses tended to fit into one or more of these categories which are considered further below.

Not something they need or are interested in, or just not for them.

Lack of digital skills or unable to use technology.

Lack of trust and concern about scams.

### **Not for them**

Several participants talked about not being brought up with the internet while sometimes recognising the benefits for younger people.

*'Kids are brilliant at technology, they were brought up on it. A lot of us didn't even have a telephone when we were young'.*

*'We are a retired generation, have more time. You manage to sort yourself out. A busy mother who has children and is working doesn't have the time. The younger generation are a busy generation.'*

Some just felt technology was not for them. One man who had used a computer at work but never got to grips with it described himself as a *'compl*

People also said they preferred to do things in other ways or had better things to do with their time.

*± like writing, like talking to people'.*

*'I don't like emails, the internet and texts, can get misconstrued because no emotion behind it.... If you can talk to someone that's the best.'*

Another participant said he had *'so many other interests to do, at one time could have spent all day on the internet but after a while it becomes boring'*.

### **Lack of need**

*the internet but*







## Life offline

We heard that being offline affects a range of day-to-day activities, and that the impact varies.

### Contacting the doctor

People had very different experiences of contacting their doctor and health services during the pandemic. Some said their doctor was very helpful and it was easy to get an appointment, whereas others had found things very difficult - although this was not necessarily because they were not online. However, a few commented that there was increased pressure to access services online.

*'Getting an appointment is an issue. If you have a computer, you can log on at 7am but they don't start taking phone calls until 8am. I wrote complaining about this but never got a reply.'*

*'Have to go to the doctors to get a prescription – physically drop it off and wait 48 hours to be posted. Not allowed to ring for a prescription.'*

### Shopping

While some had experienced difficulties with shopping early in the pandemic, most were able to shop locally themselves or had family, friends or neighbours who helped. Not being able to shop online was not generally a problem although two people mentioned trying to get a catalogue of disability equipment and being told it was only online, and someone else said that early in the pandemic he could pick items up from a store, but ordering was online only, so he had to get his son to do this. A couple of people said they knew that some things were cheaper online, but on the other hand someone else mentioned delivery charges for grocery shopping. There were also positive comments about shopping in person where you can see what you are buying and can try things on. One man said he went to his local store where he knew the staff and liked the personal contact whereas shopping online was *'very impersonal'*. Another said, *'At our age we prefer to go out shopping and chatting to people'*.

One specific concern was around a milk and grocery delivery firm which changed to only accepting online orders during the pandemic. One of our participants was unhappy as she now has to drive for 20 minutes to the shops to get milk.

Among people who use the internet, or whose partner does, a few shop online at trusted sites, but others still prefer to shop in person.

### Keeping in contact

Most non-users did not express concerns about keeping in contact with friends and family. *'I am not bothered, if I want to speak to people I use the phone'*. One woman whose family was mainly *'it would be nice to see their faces but wouldn't be worth getting a computer'*.

However, a woman who was a trustee for a charity, was unable to be involved during the pandemic as all the meetings were online. And another said she would love to talk by video to her daughter who was living abroad.

### Banking

The people we talked to visit their bank in person if they have one nearby, use the Post Office network, get money out at cashpoints or through cashback in shops, or in a few cases use telephone banking or have help from family. They were mainly quite happy with dealing with their finances in these ways. However, some participants had found it getting more difficult due to local bank closures.

One man whose local bank branch had closed had moved to using a building society because he likes to be able to see someone. But he still has to go to the bank from time to time as he has a savings account there. This now costs £10 for the taxi fare. Others talked about having to drive 20-30 minutes to get the bank.

Another participant described how she had travelled 8 miles to the building society to close an ISA account only to be told she had to do this online. They finally agreed to *'a lot of people living on their own would struggle'*.

However, the closure of bank branches was not seen as a reason to bank online. No-one we talked to, including those who currently use the internet, expressed any interest in banking online and many had concerns about security.

*'I think it's a trust issue more than anything else. You hear so much about people being scammed'*.

*'Would never dream of banking on it, wouldn't take that step.....I am not confident about using it, that's the top and tail of it.'*

*'Wouldn't touch it with a barge pole. The situation is that fraudsters are always coming up with new ideas and banks are doing catch up'*.

*'[Scammers] know how to get you over a barrel and then fleece you'*.

## Other areas of life



also makes video calls and sends photos to a friend abroad, although says she

### **Interest in gaining skills**

Among those who did not use the internet, most did not want to, or felt it was not possible for them to do so. Some people we spoke to had used the internet in the past, perhaps before they retired, but had given up 'f



**But not everyone is able or wants to be online**



## Appendix

Interviewees were recruited through Age  
[redacted] how much has this changed since the start of the pandemic in March 2020? Please  
[redacted] All  
[redacted] using it less often than  
[redacted] before  
[redacted] Interviews were then carried out by telephone in June and  
[redacted] old, those with reduced mobility, those offline, the  
[redacted] 750 people aged 50+. It is not representative  
[redacted] weighted towards those aged over 75 and  
[redacted] other research or panels.

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