

COVID-19 and the digital divide

Supporting digital
inclusion and skills
during the pandemic
and beyond

July 2021



Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, people without access to the internet were already at a significant disadvantage in terms of seeking job opportunities, accessing financial support, ordering online, and connecting with organisations.

The pandemic has dramatically exacerbated this situation. Many people, for the first time, have increasingly had to rely on the internet and digital devices to access support, get things done and to participate more fully in society. This digital inequality can be particularly seen for those in mid to later life, with ONS data (2020) highlighting that prior to the pandemic, 32% of those who had never or not recently used the internet were aged between 50 and 69 (over 1 million individuals).

As a response to this challenging context, the Centre for Ageing

Better commissioned Citizens Online, a digital skills and inclusion charity, to conduct a research project to understand more about the effect of COVID-19 on digital skills and usage. The research was conducted with a range of organisations, local authorities, and people aged 50-70.

The research aimed to:

- Identify and share the good practice developed by organisations to help digitally excluded older people with skills training.
- Understand how older people in need of digital skills support have improved their knowledge by engaging with organisations.

The findings from this report will be of particular interest to leaders of community organisations, digital inclusion role holders at local authorities, digital-focused charities and funders wanting to support local community groups.



32%

of those who had never or not recently used the internet were aged between 50 and 69 (over 1 million individuals). (ONS, 2020a)

Summary of key findings

1. **There is a significant digital divide among 50–70 year olds, exacerbated by the pandemic.**
2. **Digital inclusion is not just about being online, it's also about building skills and confidence.** Even a small number of skills building sessions can really boost confidence and use.



3. **Local and national organisations have had to adapt to continue to support users throughout the pandemic.** Most organisations who responded to our research were able to move services online (68%) or to telephone (64%). There are many examples of good practice where groups have supported people despite the challenges.
4. **There is a lack of awareness among older adults of the support available.** The overwhelming majority of participants in our study were not aware of an organisation that could help them if they needed it, despite the prevalence of local support. This is an ongoing challenge in digital exclusion.

5. **Organisations need more financial and peer support to support digital inclusion.** Typically small, local organisations offering digital support are very effective at reaching out to people in need but have financial and resource constraints.



6. **Remote support has benefits beyond the role played in the pandemic.** Accessing support by phone or online can be more convenient to people and more efficient for the provider.
7. **Non-digital channels still need to be supported.** Many people still do not want to use the internet and want to continue using non-digital channels. More than half of phone poll respondents who were offline at the start of the pandemic still did not feel the need to start six months later.

Methodology

The research methods for the project were:

1. A phone poll by the research firm, Survation, looking at people's use of the internet and digital devices overall. It was conducted with a sample of 502 people representative of those aged 50-70 nationally living with household incomes under £25,000. This income figure was chosen as an indicator of households who are less likely to be online regularly.
2. Two online surveys which ran from late November 2020 through to mid-January 2021. These were circulated from Citizens Online via social media, messaging, and email platforms:
 - The first survey was to organisations providing support to understand if and how they have changed their service delivery. The survey was circulated to the email database for Citizens Online, as well as to UK Online Centres, and the COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK list of local groups. A total of 252 organisations were included in the final analysis.
 - The second online survey was targeted at individuals aged 50-70. The aim was to understand their digital usage before the pandemic, what has changed since, and whether they have been able to access help. 295 completed responses were received.
3. Follow up in-depth interviews with nine organisations and eight people aged 50-70 exploring the issues raised in their original responses.

Key findings

1. There is a significant digital divide among 50–70 year olds, exacerbated by the pandemic.

Across the UK, 3 million people are offline (ONS 2020). Of these, 32% or approximately 1 million people are aged 50-69. The majority (67%) were aged 70 or over. Someone's age may be a leading factor in whether or not they're online, but it is not the only one. We know that low income is also a key risk factor in digital exclusion (Lloyd's Bank 2020).

Our research has shown that for the organisations and groups who support people, the pandemic has created a greater urgency to help those most at risk. There has been a clear aim to contact people and assess how they need support with everyday services and where there is a digital challenge. Examples include accessing healthcare and Universal Credit (UC) applications. 77% of organisations surveyed were helping people to do new things online, including benefit applications and online shopping. The need to help people with getting devices and affordable data packages has

also been a strong theme during the pandemic. Schemes such as the Devices Dot Now campaign collected tablets, smartphones and laptops, as well as connectivity in the form of SIMs and dongles from businesses and distributed these through UK Online Centres and some other groups.

“Digital's always been part of our programme... But it's never been the most important thing... When you ask me about what's happening now [it's a] different story... Now they say to you, I can't do this because I haven't got a device or... I've got to book a doctor's appointment online, or I've got to book a shopping slot and I don't know how to do that... or the library's shut, so now I can't go in and use that computer or access my emails.”

Ageless Thanet



3m

people are offline across the UK. (ONS, 2020a)

2. Digital inclusion is not just about being online, it's also about building skills and confidence.

For many older people the challenge has been to build confidence and skills at new digital tasks. Bodies such as Ofcom have stated that a quarter of all UK adult internet users can be classified as “narrow” users – meaning they are only using a limited number of online activities on a day-to-day basis. Ofcom’s data showed that those aged 55+ are particularly likely to be classified in this category, compared to younger age groups: 32% for 55-64 year olds which rises to 49% for 65-74 year olds.

Our survey responses and interviews with organisations have demonstrated the value that people place on joining regular sessions to develop their skillset. Over two-thirds of organisations have been helping people to do new things online (67%), and just under two-thirds are helping people to set up digital devices (61%).

“There's a lot of people who have got a smartphone. But, you can only do so much on a smartphone. A lot didn't have data with the basic contracts they have and a lot of them didn't have the skills to take a photograph and send a WhatsApp message, or do a transaction. I found a lot of them were struggling because they just didn't know how to do things.”

North Manchester Community Partnership

In our phone poll, the most commonly identified barrier for individuals was related to self-perception and lack of motivation (56%):

“The first step you take is the hardest. If you can motivate yourself to take that first step and say to yourself, “I want to go and do this, I am going to do this go” and do it, you will be supported. For me I needed to ask loads of questions even if some sounded repetitive so that I could understand how to do things.”

Valerie, Thanet

3. Local and national organisations have had to adapt to continue to support users throughout the pandemic.

Support groups and organisations have had to work hard to respond and adapt given the national government guidance during the pandemic period to stay at home.

Most organisations who responded to our research were able to move services online (68%) or over the telephone (64%).

Some organisations have used this opportunity to adapt the skillset of their volunteers or digital champions to improve their digital skills offering. In Dorset, for example, one organisation found that referring to digital champions with specialisms (e.g., ‘Apple specialist’ or ‘online security specialist’) has been effective when engaging with users.

“For our digital champions it's really useful if you've got a similar device at home and you can see it and explain over the phone what the caller needs to do. Among our champions we have Android specialists and Apple specialists. We also have people who are good on Facebook, Skype, Zoom and we have people who are particularly good with online shopping. And then we've got someone who works in online security, so anyone who's had a query about security can be directed to them.”

Digital Dorset organisation

The benefits of being a participant in digital skills training sessions can be seen through our qualitative research. It enabled participants to improve their digital skills, but also to support others – within groups and within their communities.

“[It] was a lifesaver because everybody... on that group has some experience of something or other... They have been really, really helpful... That is the great thing about the internet. You can look everything up, there will be an answer on there. And... somebody will have experienced something... I do it all the time — I'll give the answers to people as well!”

Margaret, 64, Greater London

4. There is a lack of awareness among older adults of the support available.

Despite the availability and prevalence of local groups providing digital skills support, the overwhelming majority of participants in our study were not aware of an organisation that could help them if they needed it.

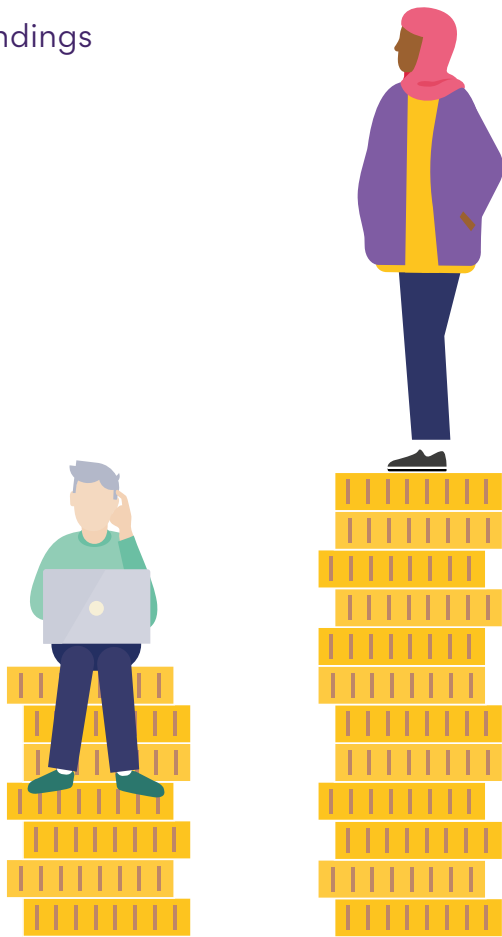
This is an ongoing challenge, with many digitally excluded people not knowing where to turn to for digital support. For example, our phone poll found that only one in eight people (13%) were aware of a digital support organisation.

Of those who found organisations to support them, due to the varied range of support available, one found it challenging and time consuming to find a suitable local group. In our survey many referred to Google or YouTube as a first support point, while some mentioned libraries, Citizens Advice, and specialist digital skills or local organisations.

Our research suggests that smaller organisations in particular would benefit from better marketing support to maximise their ability to promote their services via different channels on a regular basis.

“I often need assistance when something happens that I don't understand but don't know where to go for help.”

Pat, East Sussex



5. Organisations need more financial and peer support to support digital inclusion

Organisations that participated in our research reported an overwhelming demand for digital support during the pandemic. While many smaller, local organisations have been effective at reaching out to communities and people, a number have reported that it has been challenging to balance the demand for a wide range of digital support – from device loans, queries about data packages, use of specific platforms and apps – with the resources available.

“I was seriously overwhelmed with phone calls... it's been quite a nightmare to be honest. It's just never stopped – from March until Christmas when I turned it off! ... I've had a break but then we started New Year and it's just back into it again...”

John Curtin, North Manchester Community Partnership

Our research indicates that organisations in places with higher deprivation and those with deep roots in communities have experienced greater demand. One case study in our research from a non-profit organisation, Samafal, working with the BAME community in Edmonton, London shows the deep digital exclusion felt by people.

The organisation faced a huge increase in demand for support, including digital support. At an early point in the pandemic, the organisation helped 50 people in a week, where normally they might deal with 60 in a month. People needed help to access benefits, but also to access information about the impact of different benefits.

In some other locations, there has been a reduction in people seeking support, which affects funding which is based on a certain demand. Some organisations have been able to access emergency funding or develop systems to reach people in their homes. Others have known digitally excluded people are in their community but have been unable to help them because of challenges the pandemic has brought.

“Less learners, so less money coming in from funding, so less flexibility to offer courses as less money available. Staff not being able to be part of face-to-face delivery as they are shielding/vulnerable reduces what we can offer to the community...”

Education and skills provider, Humberside

To continue the vital work in delivering digital skills support, organisations need more peer support and financial support from national and local government.

6. Remote support has benefits beyond the role played in the pandemic

The benefits of remote support are significant for some service users, allowing them to overcome the difficulties of travel and costs, as well as enabling them to join sessions at more convenient times. For those users shielding or with mobility issues, the offer of a remote session has been a positive development. For the delivery organisation, this can also result in reduced venue costs and less time spent travelling in between sites, supporting organisations to reach greater numbers of people. The future model should be a hybrid one with remote as well as face-to-face sessions in delivering digital skills support.

“Remote group sessions can work well and are easier to access. We have focused on areas like health that are particularly important as 'hooks' that might not have been before. We have probably helped more people as we are not spending time on travel and venue set up.”

Carers organisation, Yorkshire, and the Humber

7. Non-digital channels need to be still supported

The trend toward digital as the key channel for engagement with government and business services was happening before the pandemic. It has accelerated over the last year with the restrictions. However, many people still do not want to use the internet, with over half (56%) of our phone poll respondents stating that they don't use the internet because “I don't feel the need to” or “it's not for me”.

Whilst efforts to promote the benefits of being online need to continue, room must be made for those who choose not to go online in their daily life. Some organisations (15%) were able to continue in-person services after taking measures to make their venues more COVID-19 secure, others were able to start telephone hotline services to digital champions. Local and national government, businesses and other community services need to ensure that non-digital options, such as the phone are still available for people.



Examples of good practice



The case study interviews from this research have highlighted many examples of good practice from organisations delivering services to users in challenging circumstances. Examples include:

- **Offering assisted support to digitally excluded people** – enabling people to access goods and services through volunteers without having to get online (Ageless Thanet, Northfield Community Partnership, West Chesterton Mutual Aid)
- **Using referral networks**, and ‘word-of-mouth’ based on years of community work to reach digitally excluded people (North Manchester Community Partnership, Samafal, Digital Brighton & Hove)
- **Reaching people for digital support via direct mail**, or paper-based information

circulated through other support networks including food banks (Ageless Thanet, Northfield Neighbourhood Network)

- **Contacting service users by telephone** to identify digitally excluded people and to provide phone support (Age UK, Lloyds Banking Group, Digital Brighton & Hove)
- **Using digital systems**, including freely available collaboration and online-form creation tools to work effectively during this time (Ageless Thanet, West Chesterton Mutual Aid)
- **Developing specialisms in digital champions** – the world of digital devices, websites and applications is vast, so building a bank of specialist to signpost to can be a time-saver in training sessions (Digital Dorset)

These case studies and more are available from the Centre for Ageing Better website.

Recommendations

- **National and local government need to recognise the crucial digital support offered by the local organisations.** These organisations can provide the reach to the digitally excluded but need more support to help them in the future. Government needs to provide a digital skills support and training fund for organisations.
- **Local authorities need to collaborate formally on digital inclusion projects with community organisations more.** This can help identify and measure who is digitally excluded in an area, and lead to more targeted and measurable work between the authority and organisations. Local authorities are also best placed as a trusted communications channel to residents in promoting organisations offering digital skills
- **The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) should create a resource bank that signposts to all the resources available to digital champions from one central place. 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.
 - **There is an ongoing need for devices to be made available.** Corporate and small businesses need to continue their work to collaborate with device recycling charities to offer used kit that can be distributed to local groups.
 - **Non-digital options from both the public and private sector, such as telephone or mail , need to continue for those people who cannot or choose not to be online.**
 - **Local authorities and digital support groups should encourage peer support through campaigns for volunteer digital champions.** Many 50–70 year olds are confident digital users, and would be ideal people to help understand users’ needs.

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