

Briefing Paper

Digital inclusion and older people – how have things changed in a Covid-19 world?



March 2021

Introduction

Since the onset of coronavirus, the public sector, businesses, and entertainment providers have increasingly turned to digital technology. The role of the internet has therefore become even more important, and for some people this has changed the way they work, access services, maintain social contacts, and generally live their lives. However, for others it has had a more limited impact, and it must be remembered that not everyone uses the internet.

Given digital exclusion increases with age, there are important questions about how any increased reliance on technology in our society has affected the older population. Even before the pandemic, Age UK regularly heard from older people who had concerns about the increasing move to digital access. For example, when Age UK carried out interviews with older people who had given up using the internet, some mentioned frustrations such as the time taken to arrange a doctor's appointment, difficulties accessing information without family help, and increased costs. However, in general, people found ways to manage, and accepted that some things might take a bit longer or cost a bit more.¹

The pace of change now seems to have increased, for example, through greater reliance on online shopping, virtual access to GPs, and more shops and services refusing to take cash. And restrictions on social interaction have led to concerns about loneliness and isolation, particularly for those who do not use or find it difficult to use digital technology to keep in contact. So, it has become more important than ever to consider the position of those who are not digitally engaged.

This briefing presents new data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) Covid-19 Substudy (Wave 1), carried out in June/July 2020, which looks at the impact the pandemic has had on internet use among people aged 52+ in England. We also consider what needs to be done to ensure that everyone who can benefit from digital technology does so, while those who cannot, do not miss out.

Key points and recommendations

A large majority of 50-64 year olds (88%) and 65-74 year olds (75%) in England use the internet every day or almost every day, compared to under half (46%) of those aged 75+. Others use it less often, but **among those aged 75+ more than two out of five (42%) do not use the internet.**

Two-fifths (39%) of people aged 52 plus in England say they are using the internet more since the start of the coronavirus. However, usage has increased most among groups already using the internet regularly, and so far, **there is little evidence that significant numbers of those previously digitally excluded have been prompted to get online during the first few months of the pandemic.** Among those aged 75+, only around a quarter (24%) are using the internet more while nearly one in ten (9%) are using it less.

Although the over 75s make up the highest proportion of non-users, **only 15% of these say they would like to use the internet more.** Among those people age 52+ who said they would like to use the internet more, the most common barrier was lack of digital skills, especially among the 75+ group where nearly four out of five (79%) mentioned this. The next most common responses for this age group are lack of trust in the internet, and not having access to equipment or broadband.

For most older people, **the best approach to gaining digital skills is through ongoing support, tailored to their needs and preferences, and delivered on a one-to-one basis.** Traditionally, digital inclusion programmes have relied on face-to-face support. But with recent restrictions, organisations are developing support services that can be accessed remotely, over the telephone or via video call.

Enabling older people to be safe and confident online takes time. **There is a need for far greater resources to be available so that Age UK and other organisations can reach and engage with many more people** and provide the ongoing and in-depth support they need to get online, and improve their digital skills, at this difficult time.

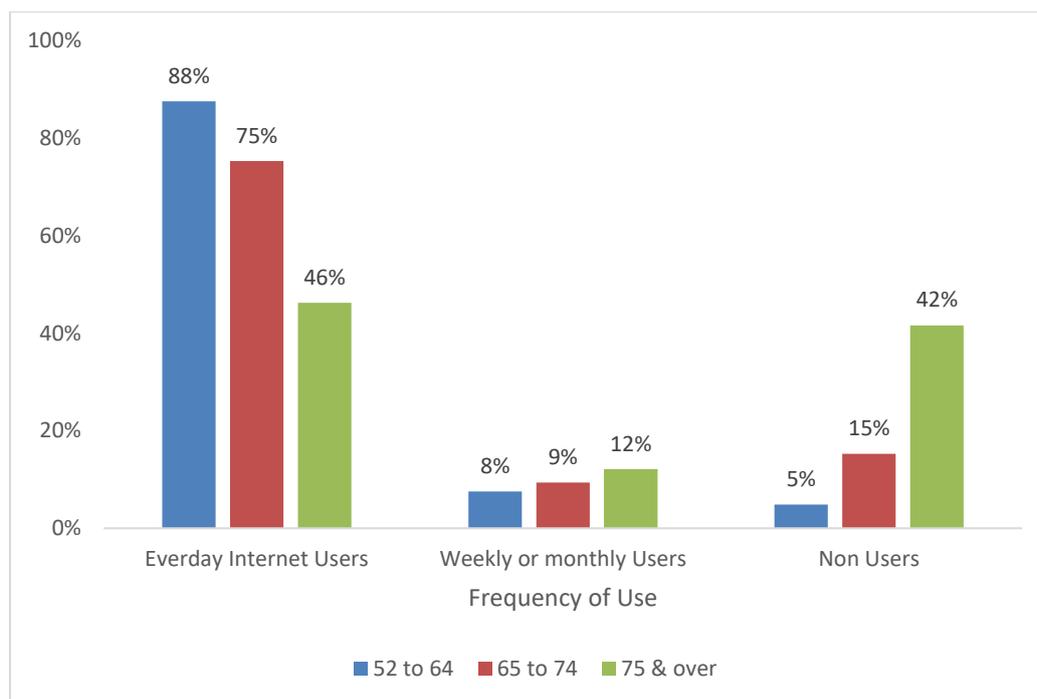
While many more people could benefit from digital technology, **those who cannot, or do not want to be online should be able to access services and support in a way that suits them.** Even if the pandemic does prompt more people to use digital technology, some will never get online while half a million older people in the UK have used the internet in the past but no longer do so. Others will only want to use the internet in a limited way. Being able to make video calls to keep in contact with family can make a big difference but it does not mean that the older person also has the skills and confidence to deal with their finances online or access services. People must be able to access information, keep in touch, manage their finances, shop, and access public services in ways that suit them.

Internet use since the onset of coronavirus

New Age UK analysis of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) Covid-19 Substudy provides information about internet use by older people a few months after the start of the pandemic (see Appendix for more detail). The figures from this relate to people in England only.

Internet use is much lower among those aged 75+ than among other groups aged 52+. This can be seen in Chart 1 which shows the average internet use by people aged 52+, in June/July 2020. The majority of 52-64 year olds (88%) and 65-74 year olds (75%) are 'everyday' internet users (using it at least once a day or nearly every day), compared to just under half (46%) of those aged 75+. More than two out of five (42%), of those aged 75+ are non-users (never using it or less than once a month) while the rest (12%) say they use the internet either at least once a week or at least once a month.

Chart 1: Average internet use since the coronavirus outbreak

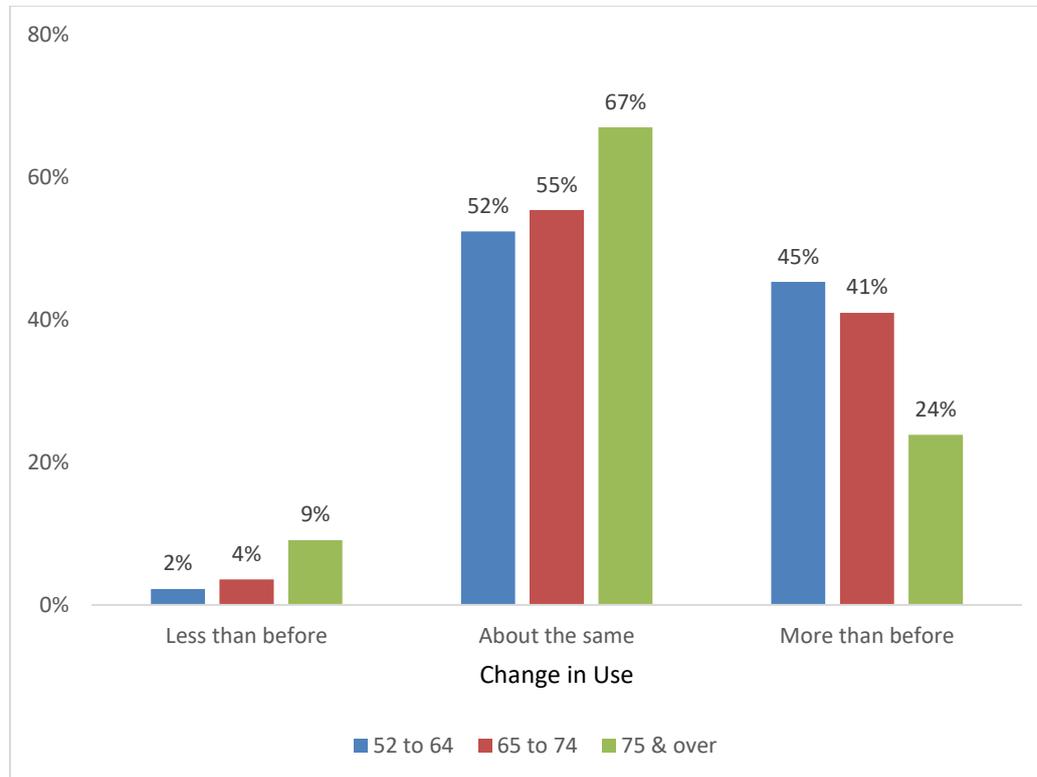


Source: Age UK analysis of ELSA Covid-19 Substudy Wave 1, 2020.

The study asked if people had changed their use of the internet since the coronavirus outbreak and found that among all those aged 52+, around two in five (39%) of people said they have used it more, 57% have used it about the same, and a small proportion (4%) say they have used it less since the outbreak.

However, as can be seen in Chart 2 below, responses varied by age. While around two in five 52-64 year olds (45%) and a similar proportion of 60-74 year olds (41%) have used the internet more since the outbreak, this is only the case for one in four (24%) for those aged 75+.

Chart 2: Change in internet use since the coronavirus outbreak



Source: Age UK analysis of ELSA Covid-19 Substudy, Wave 1, 2020.

When these figures are compared with the findings in the 2018-19 ELSA survey (the last time the full survey was carried out) it can be seen that internet use since the coronavirus outbreak for people aged 52-64 and 65-74 is similar to levels in 2018-19. For those aged 75+ it slightly increased but at a rate consistent with the trend of growth since 2011.ⁱⁱ We therefore conclude that the first few months of the pandemic did not bring about a substantial increase in digital engagement. However, we will be able to check progress when the next ELSA Covid-19 Substudy is published later in 2021.

While increased use is to be expected with people staying at home more, it is worth considering the finding that over half of the younger age groups, and two-thirds of the 75+ group report their internet use is about the same. Furthermore, 4% of all aged 52+ and nearly one in ten (9%) of those aged 75+ say they have been using the internet less. This may reflect less access to support as face-to-face contacts

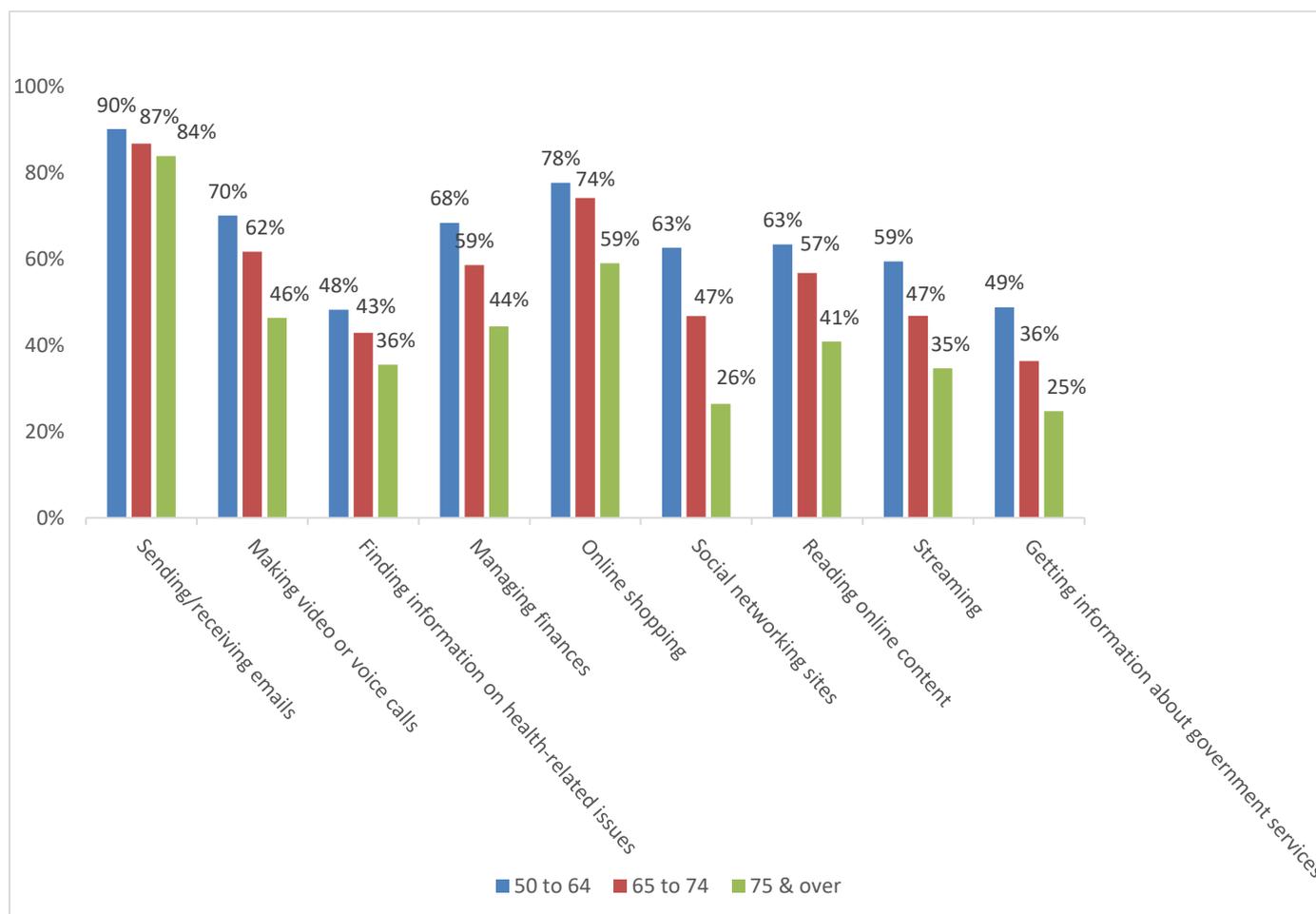
have been restricted as well as more limited access to Wi-Fi and digital equipment in public places like libraries.

What activities are internet users carrying out online since the start of the coronavirus outbreak?

Chart 3 shows the online activities carried out by people aged 52+ in England who were using the internet at least once a month since the coronavirus outbreak. It shows:

- Sending or receiving emails was the most common use of the internet among people from all three age groups (84% to 90%).
- Online shopping was the next most common use of the internet. Around three in four internet users aged 50-64 (78%) and 65-74 (74%) used the internet for this purpose, and around three in five (59%) people aged 75+.
- Making video or voice calls and managing finances were the third and fourth most common use of the internet. Around two-thirds of people aged 50-64 used the internet for making calls (70%) and managing finances (68%), around three in five people aged 65-74 (62% and 59%) and a somewhat lower proportion of people aged 75+ (46% and 44%).
- The use of the internet for social networking and streaming was more common among people aged 50-64 (63% and 59%) than people aged 65-74 (47% and 47%) and people aged 75+ (26% and 35%).
- Finding information on health-related issues and on government services was the least, or one of the least, common use of the internet. Around half of people aged 50-64 (48% and 49%) used the internet for these purposes and around two in five people aged 65-74 (43% for health-related issues and 36% for government services). Among those aged 75+ just over one in three people (36%) used it to find health-related information and one in four (25%) for information on government services.

Chart 3: Online activities by those who use the internet at least monthly



Source: Age UK analysis of ELSA Covid-19 Substudy, Wave 1, 2020.

Unfortunately, we cannot compare these responses to activities undertaken just before lockdown, but we can see which of these activities the same individuals said they carried out in 2018/19 when they were last surveyed. This information was available on internet use for email, managing finances, providing health-related information, and online shopping.

The biggest change in internet use since 2018/19 was that among all three age groups more people are now sending emails and shopping online. Some have started to manage their finances online, but others had stopped doing so, and perhaps surprisingly, a greater proportion of those who had previously used the internet for looking for health-related information have stopped doing this than the proportion who have started.

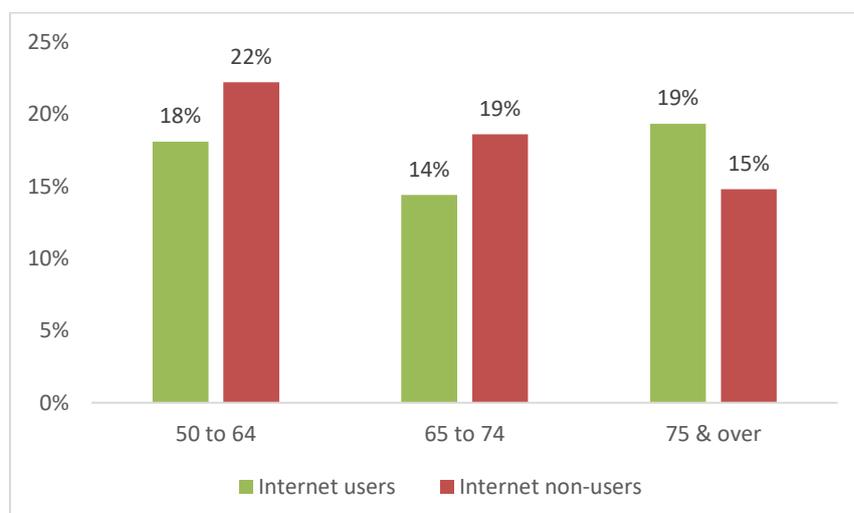
Looking just at those aged 75+, the group who are least likely to use the internet:

- Around a third (33%) of those who were not using email in 2018/19 were doing so in 2020. Nearly one in ten (9%) who were emailing in 2018/19 no longer did so in 2020.
- 15% of those who were not managing their finances online in 2018/19 were doing so in 2020. 19% who were managing their finances online in 2018/19 were no longer did so in 2020.
- Around a third (30%) of those who were not shopping online in 2018/19 were doing so in 2020. 21% who were shopping online in 2018/19 no longer did so in 2020.
- 19% of those were looking for health information online in 2018/19 were doing so in 2020. 59% who were looking for health information online in 2018/19 were no longer did so in 2020.

Would people like to use the internet more?

Chart 4 shows the proportion of people aged 52+ in England who would like to use the internet more frequently or for more things, broken down by age and by whether they are users or non-users of the internet. The chart shows that, irrespective of age and whether responders use the internet or not, a similar proportion (around 15% to 20%) of people wish to use the internet more or for more things. Importantly, it shows that while, as seen above, the over 75s make up the highest proportion of non-users, only 15% of these say they would like to use the internet more.

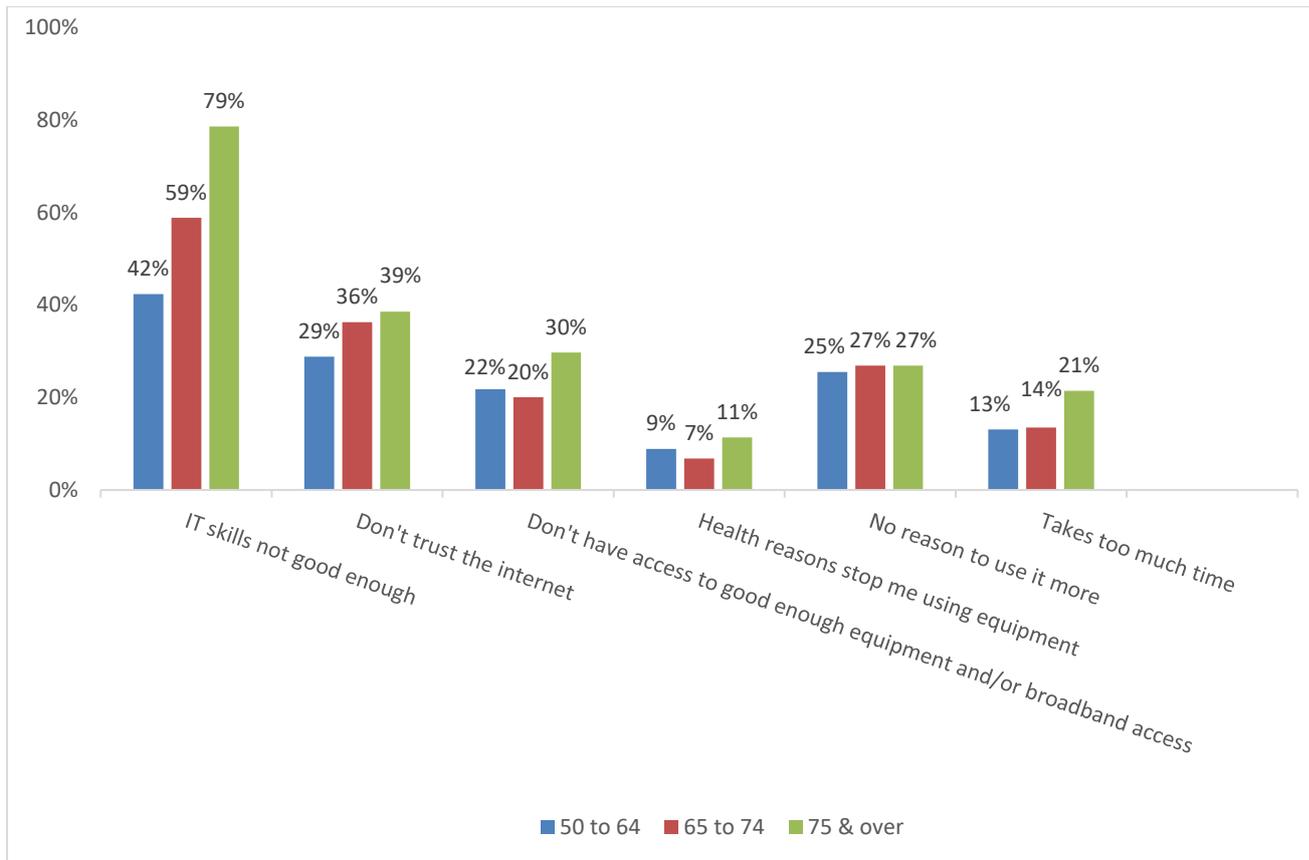
Chart 4: Proportion wanting to use the internet more frequently or for more tasks



Source: Age UK analysis of ELSA Covid-19 Substudy Wave 1, 2020.

Chart 5 shows that among those people aged 52+ in England who want to use the internet more or for more tasks, the most common reason for not doing so is due to lack of digital skills, especially among the 75+ age group where nearly four out of five (79%) mentioned this. The next most common reasons were lack of trust in the internet and not having good enough access to equipment or broadband.

Chart 5: Reasons why people do not use the internet more when they say they would like to



Source: Age UK analysis of ELSA Covid-19 Substudy, Wave 1, 2020.

There needs to be more support to increase digital engagement

The new findings given above show that while there has been an increase in digitalisation across many areas of life, the pandemic has not prompted substantial numbers of older people to get online. Furthermore, only 15% of non-users aged 75+ and 19% of non-users aged 65-74 year olds show interest in using the internet. Surveys and research previously undertaken have found that many older people who do not use the internet say they are not interested or have no reason to do so. Other barriers that people face include lack of skills, concern about scams and security, the cost of broadband and equipment, having no-one to help when things go wrong, and difficulties due to physical impairments or cognitive decline. And we know that using the internet is not like riding a bike – a skill you gain and then retain – more than half a million people aged 65+ in the UK are ‘lapsed users’ – that is people who have used it in the past but no longer do so. As well as the barriers above, people in this position have told us that it can be difficult to keep up with changes in technology.ⁱⁱⁱ

These barriers have not gone away with the start of the pandemic. Among 10 non-internet users (of varying ages) who were interviewed in a study commissioned by the Broadband Stakeholder Group, there was still the view that being online wouldn’t bring sufficient benefits, alongside other barriers such as lack of digital skills.^{iv} However, among 10 participants in the study who had recently started to use the internet, and a further 10 who had been using it for up to 18 months, views were generally positive with some saying they wished they had got online sooner. For those who had recently started to use the internet, the main driver was being able to keep in contact with family and friends, who could also be helpful in providing digital support.

The pandemic has made it more important than ever that people have support to learn to use digital technology or increase their digital skills. However, at the same time, they may be seeing friends and family less so have limited informal support and may not be able to access the internet at public places such as libraries, or travel to centres that provide training with digital skills.

Some organisations are running schemes to address digital exclusion in response to coronavirus – for example, the DevicesDotNow initiative is providing digital technology to people (of all ages) who do not have access to the internet.^v Age UK, as an organisation that for many years has worked at a national and local level to support older people to gain digital skills, has also been looking for new and innovative ways to help. See the box below for more about Age UK’s work.

Age UK support for digital inclusion

Age UK has extensive experience of delivering digital inclusion programmes and resources which aim to support older people to develop the skills and confidence to live an independent life in an increasingly digital world. Nationally, Age UK produces information about technology and the internet, including how to keep in touch using video calls and how to stay safe online.^{vi} We also work with local Age UK organisations to deliver programmes such as One Digital, which helped deliver better digital skills through 'Digital Champions'.^{vii} Many of the 130 local Age UK's in England also run projects to help people gain digital skills, sometimes working with other local organisations and businesses.

Older learners generally need ongoing support, tailored to their needs and preferences, and often this is most effective when delivered on a one-to-one basis. Traditionally, digital inclusion programmes have relied on face-to-face engagement. But with recent restrictions, Age UK services nationally and locally have had to develop support services that can be accessed remotely, over the telephone or via video call.

In one initiative, Dixons Carphone donated around 500 tablets and MiFi dongles to Age UK to distribute to older people who are most at risk of digital exclusion. As well as their new device, these older people had access to a free technology helpline, facilitated by Dixons Carphone staff volunteers who were able to guide the older person through how to set up their tablet and make the most out of it. If the older person would rather do this independently, Age UK also provided simple and easy-to-follow instructions alongside the device.

Even before organisations can start to provide support there is the challenge of reaching people and engaging their interest and trying to demonstrate how it could be of benefit to them. After that, they need to ensure people have appropriate equipment and internet access as well as support to gain skills.

An example from a local Age UK providing digital support

Age UK Lancashire received 50 tablets from IT services company Softcat in March 2020 for distribution to older people to enable them to contact family members over social media platforms. It took some time to identify those in need of devices but over the summer they reached individuals through referrals from social prescribers working in the health service and their own staff members. They have also recruited a Digital Inclusion Worker who is providing bespoke support over the phone and investigating other sources of equipment, new and second hand. They will provide devices on a loan basis to enable individuals to get online for the first time.

Organisations like Age UK could do much more to support people who are digitally excluded but need the resources to be able to do this. There is a great need for more resources for Age UK and other organisations, so that they can reach out to older people and then provide the ongoing and in-depth support they need to get online and improve their digital skills at this difficult time.

But not everyone is able to gain digital skills

Age UK believes that older people should be supported and encouraged to get online but that those who cannot or do not want to do so should continue to be able to access services and support in a way suits them. Even if the pandemic does prompt more people to use digital technology, there will still be many who are not yet online or will never be able to use the internet, while others will only want to use it for limited activities. Being able to make video calls to keep in contact with family can make a big difference but it does not mean that the older person also has the skills and confidence to deal with their finances online or access services – all too often there is an assumption that a small amount of use automatically means people have the confidence and skills to use the internet to meet all their needs.

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

Appendix

The ELSA study and definitions of internet use

The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) is a large-scale longitudinal panel study of people aged 50 and over and their partners, living in private households in England. The first wave of the ELSA Covid-19 study is a follow-up study looking at the impact of the pandemic. It took place in June/July 2020 and is based on a sample of the regular ELSA study. For the purposes of analysing survey responses, the weights created by the ELSA Study Team to account for non-responses, are restricted to those living in England and aged 52+ at the time of the Covid-19 survey. The youngest people in the most recent wave of the full ELSA study were 50 in 2018 so will have been 52 by the time of the Covid-19 substudy.

In this paper we use the following definitions of internet users:

- 'Everyday' internet users are people who use the internet at least once a day or almost everyday.
- 'Weekly or monthly' users are defined as people who use the internet at least once a week or once a month.
- 'Non users' are defined as people who have never used the internet or use it less than monthly.

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ⁱ *Not like riding a bike: why some older people stop using the internet.* Age UK, 2020.

https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/lapsed_users_report_march-2020.pdf

ⁱⁱ 94% of people aged 50-64 were everyday, weekly, or monthly users in 2018/19 (based on responses to the ELSA Wave 9 survey) compared to 96% since the coronavirus outbreak (based on responses to the ELSA Covid-19 substudy Wave 1 survey). For people aged 65-74 the figures are 85% and 84% respectively. For people aged 75+ the figures are 53% and 58% - a five percentage point increase over this period is much as would be expected given trends in internet use among older age groups. ONS figures on internet use in the UK show the proportion of people 75+ using the internet rose by between 2 and 7 percentage points in each year since 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Not like riding a bike: why some older people stop using the internet.* Age UK, 2020.

https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/lapsed_users_report_march-2020.pdf

^{iv} <http://www.broadbanduk.org/2020/11/02/new-bsg-report-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-digitally-excluded/>

^v <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/devicesdotnow>

^{vi} www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/work-learning/technology-internet/

^{vii} <https://www.onedigitaluk.com/>