



Age UK's evidence to the Communications and Digital Committee's inquiry into digital exclusion and the cost of living

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About this consultation

The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee launched an inquiry to look at how the rising cost of living will affect digital exclusion and to identify solutions around how the issue can be tackled.

Key points and recommendations

Increasing digitalisation risks leaving those who are not online excluded from everyday life. Many in this situation have low and modest incomes so have been hard hit by the rising cost of essential goods and services.

Age UK is particularly concerned that increased digitalisation is leading to some older people facing difficulties accessing public services.

While many older people fully embrace the digital world, our analysis indicates that around a third of people aged 75+ and one in ten people aged 65-74 in the UK have not recently used the internet and many others only use it to a limited extent.

Older people who are not online are digitally excluded for a number of inter-related reasons. Key barriers are lack of motivation and lack of digital skills. Other factors include concerns about security and scams, cost, and health impairments.

The Government should set out a new Digital Inclusion Strategy that provides an overview of the current situation, looks at what more needs to be done to increase digital inclusion, and considers the best ways to realise these aims. The Government should also ensure that public sector organisations always offer offline access for those who need this.

Internet providers should publicise their social tariffs and review the support they offer. They should also make it straightforward for low-income consumers to find an affordable deal that meets their needs and to switch to a better offer where appropriate.

Businesses need to do all they can to ensure their services and products are accessible for all. This means having easy to use digital systems tested with different groups of users, and providing alternative ways of access for customers who are digitally excluded – for example customer telephone lines where calls are responded to quickly.

Civil society organisations, including Age UK, have considerable experience and skills working in communities to provide support to increase digital inclusion, based around the needs of the groups they work with. In our view most older learners need ongoing support,

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, Age Cymru, Age NI and local Age UKs across England, to help everyone make the most of later life, whatever their circumstances. In the UK, the Charity helps more than seven million older people each year by providing advice and support. It also researches and campaigns on the issues that matter most to older people. Its work focuses on ensuring that older people: have enough money; enjoy life and feel well; receive high quality health and care; are comfortable, safe and secure at home; and feel valued and able to participate.

Introduction

Age UK welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee's inquiry into digital exclusion and the cost of living. Increasing digitalisation risks leaving those who are not online excluded from everyday life and many in this situation have low and modest incomes so have been hard hit by the rising cost of essential goods and services.

While many older people fully embrace the digital world, digital exclusion increases with age. It is also associated with other characteristics including disability, ethnicity, and socio-economic disadvantage. ONS statisticsⁱ show a steady increase in internet use by older people between 2011 and 2020. These figures have not been updated since 2020 but, Age UK analysis indicates that there are still around a third of people aged 75+ and one in ten people aged 65-74 in the UK who have not recently used the internet (that is not used it within the last three months).ⁱⁱ

Age UK believes that where possible older people should be supported and encouraged to get online. However, some people have no interest in the digital world and technology, while for others the barriers to getting online are too great. Even if people use the internet they may only want to do so for limited activities. Furthermore, not everyone who gets online, stays online. The statistics referred to above also show that more than one in 20 people aged 75+ have used the internet in the past, but not recently.

In this response we focus on the issues for older people who are not online or who only use the internet and digital technology in limited ways.

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

'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.'

'[I am] not into this technical business, I refuse to be bullied into having a computer.'

'I think the internet is a bit frightening for me really, you hear so many things going on, the scams and different things.'

'I need somebody to sit down next to me and say press this, press that, and show me how to use it.'

The impact of digital exclusion

The impact of digital exclusion for individuals varies depending on their situation and how they want to live their life. Some tell us they manage without the internet, finding other ways to do things. However, in an increasingly digital world others who are offline can end up feeling excluded and frustrated. It can be harder to access healthcare and other public services, and to carry out essential tasks such as banking. Furthermore, people who are not online may end up paying more for some goods, find it harder to get information, and find it difficult to make their views known as consultations and requests for feedback are increasingly online. Some further comments from the Age UK project mentioned above are given below.

'Life has become more difficult if you can't go online.... Sometimes you are interested in something but it's all online and there is no telephone number.'

'Soon all the services will be going online. If you don't want to use the internet that is okay but you shouldn't be penalised – some people find it very difficult and expensive – I am one of them!

'I feel I don't live in this world anymore'.

Access to public services

Age UK is particularly concerned that people are increasingly expected to access public services digitally including local authority services. Back in 2018, Age UK carried out a mystery shopping exercise looking at access to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction (local authority administered benefits which provide help towards rent and council tax for low-income people). Our findings suggested that many people who were offline would find it difficult to apply for these benefits.^{iv} A recent Age UK London report shows this continues to be a problem. Using Freedom of Information requests, they found around a third (31%) of councils in London did not offer a way to apply for Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction without using the internet.^v

Age UK has also recently asked local Age UK organisations in England and local Age Cymru partners in Wales how people in their area can apply for a Blue Badge (which

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, concerns were raised as part of an Age UK survey on health and care.^{vii} Some examples of the comments we received are set in the box below.

‘Making an appointment with my GP surgery seems so complicated now, I don’t like to try.’

‘Services are too dependent on online tech. I deeply dislike being given few options for making contact and distrust technology.’

‘When I’ve tried to make an appointment to see a doctor I have been told to complete an e consult. The e consult does not list the complaint I want to talk about. I go for the closest to my complaint and am referred to a section that gives me advice on how to treat the complaint (not my complaint) the internet cuts out, I give up.’

‘Long wait times for hospital appointments plus I find it really upsetting and stressful that I now have to book blood tests, vaccinations hospital consultations etc myself online.’

In summary, while digital access to public services can be efficient for providers and for many older people who are confident with online technology, those who are not online, or have limited digital skills, can find access difficult. They may have to rely on someone else or in some cases may be deterred from trying to use the service altogether. This could mean people do not get, or delay receiving, financial support or health services, with potential long-term detriment.

Increased reliance on others

Older people who are digitally excluded may get help from friends and family who are online. In some cases, this works well. However, not everyone has someone they can ask or who they trust enough to share personal details with. For example, someone may not want to ask for help with an online claim for a benefit such as Housing Benefit because

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 from many older people and the increased numbers contacting Age UK for information and advice, that many on low and modest incomes are struggling to meet rising prices. Research we commissioned found people are most likely to report cutting down on energy, social activities, food, and transport. We did not specifically ask about the costs of digital technology although around one in six said they had cut back on other household bills which could include communications and the internet.

While motivation and skills seem to continue to be the biggest barriers to digital inclusion for older people, rising costs and concern about the affordability of devices and the internet are likely to be further deterrents. On the other hand, while there is a cost to being

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 with digital technology. Enabling and encouraging people to work longer has benefits for the economy as well as individuals.

As discussed below, the voluntary sector plays an important role in providing digital inclusion support targeted to the needs of particular groups, funded through different sources, including from the private sector and charitable trusts.

While we can see great value in the private, public, and voluntary sectors working together, we believe central Government could play a greater role in co-ordinating provision and identifying and potentially funding work to fill gaps in provision. As part of its role the Government should set out a new Digital Inclusion Strategy to replace the one published in 2014, which is now outdated. This should map out the support available and look at what more needs to be done to increase digital inclusion.

However, tackling digital exclusion for individuals should not focus solely on increasing digital engagement. It is also important to ensure that those who are not online do not become excluded because of this, and that services and consumer activities remain available to them. There is an important role for national and local government to ensure that people who are digitally excluded can easily access public services. The Public Sector

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 disability, we do not believe public bodies are meeting the duty if they do not offer easy to use, alternative ways to access their services. Age UK believes all public sector organisations should offer offline access and make people aware of the different options. We would like the Government to work with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to ensure this is the case.

How well are existing industry initiatives (for example cheaper internet tariffs) addressing digital exclusion? How could they be enhanced?

Although many internet providers offer social tariffs which can reduce the cost of broadband for people receiving certain means-tested benefits, research by Which? found that over 60% of those eligible were not aware of these, and even when people knew about them, many did not intend to switch.^x Which? have told us that awareness and willingness to switch among those hearing about social tariffs for the first time was particularly low among older age groups. In addition to lack of awareness, there are low-income older people who miss out on cheaper deals because their income is just above the level to receive Pension Credit.

Providers should publicise their social tariffs and review the support they offer. They should also make it straightforward for low-income consumers to find an affordable deal that meets their needs and to switch to a better offer where appropriate.

Businesses also need to do all they can to ensure their services and products are accessible for all. This means having easy to use digital systems tested with different groups of users, and providing alternative ways of access for customers who are digitally excluded – for example customer telephone lines where calls are responded to quickly.

How effective is civil society at supporting digital inclusion? How could this work be enhanced, and what is the appropriate balance between civil society and Government intervention?

Many civil society organisations, have considerable experience and skills working in communities to provide support to increase digital inclusion, based around the needs of the groups they work with. Age UK works locally and nationally to support older people to gain and extend digital skills. In our view most older learners need ongoing support,

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 their community to gain digital skills and stay safe online. A first step is to deliver awareness raising activities to inspire and motivate older people to get online. This involves reaching and informing people who are at risk of digital exclusion about how digital skills can help them personally and motivate them to take part in the service.

If people are inspired to get online, sessions led by Digital Champions help people to develop their digital skills and confidence by providing flexible, learner led digital skills sessions that focus on what they are most interested in. Digital Champions might support the older person with tasks such as how to use video calling, how to do an online shop, or how to pursue their hobbies online. Providing loans of technology and connectivity are also important for people who cannot afford technology or who want an opportunity to try out equipment. As part of our current programme, some of the projects are aimed at groups at high risk of exclusion including people with dementia and/or memory loss, those on low incomes and older people who are housebound. More information about Age UK's work can be found on our website and many local Age UK organisations also run their own digital support services.^{xi}

Age UK is confident that the support we offer works well for the groups that we target. However, this level of support can be resource-heavy, and funding for schemes needs to be based on quality rather than quantity of delivery to ensure real impact. Age UK welcomes the support that we receive nationally and locally from businesses and other funders, but we could reach more excluded older people with greater resources.

ⁱ Office for National Statistics (ONS). 6 April 2021. *Internet users, UK: 2020. Internet use in the UK; annual estimates by age, sex, disability, and geographical location*. [Online] Available at

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2020>

ⁱⁱ Age UK analysis of Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January-March, 2021 [<http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8806-4>]. 'Recent' use refers to people who have used the internet in the past three months.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/policy-briefing--living-in-a-digital-world-after-covid-19-the-experience-of-older-people-who-dont-live-their-lives-online.pdf>

^{iv} https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_may18_everything_is_online_nowadays.pdf

^v https://www.ageuk.org.uk/bp-assets/globalassets/london/documents/ageuk_london_mtdg_foi_final.pdf

^{vi} Age UK report, forthcoming.

^{vii} Age UK Older People's Health and Care online survey, promoted through Age UK networks and on social media, 4th-27th October 2022.

^{viii} <https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index.html>

^{ix} <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/affordability-of-communications-services>

^x <https://consumerinsight.which.co.uk/articles/broadband-social-tariffs>

^{xi} <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/programmes/digital-skills/digital-champions/>